

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF THE WELLBEING OF FEMALES APPLYING TO
COLLEGE DURING COVID-19 AT A HIGH ACHIEVING, ALL-GIRLS SCHOOL

by
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Abstract

Affluent females attending high achieving secondary schools are at risk of adjustment problems, including problem behaviors and health concerns. Despite financial advantages that afford them many opportunities, girls of higher socioeconomic status face increased pressure to succeed, including added stress during the highly selective college admission process. This multi-method study examined the wellbeing of females applying to college during COVID-19 at an all-girls school (DBS). Quantitative data were collected via the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey approximately three months before COVID-19 arrived in the United States, and five months before the school moved to remote learning for the remainder of the school year. The data suggested concerning levels of mental wellbeing pre-pandemic. Once the 2020 pandemic ensued, and disrupted the college application cycle, it was important to understand how both the college application process and mental health of students were impacted by COVID-19. In the context of this study, the impact of COVID-19 both harmed and improved student wellbeing. First, it forced students to make college decisions without visiting, including Early Decision applications. Second, changes in standardized testing worsened the wellbeing of those who had not tested before the pandemic as they did not see testing as optional (despite the colleges removing the requirement). Third, being away from their peers during the college admission cycle made the process less stressful for most students. Fourth, girls benefitted from having more time at home. Finally, students spent less time adults at school. The researcher highlights several implications and recommendations resulting from the study.

Keywords: High achieving schools, affluent female adolescents, wellbeing, college admissions

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my gram, Dorothy Beryl “DB” Johnson, the first educator in our family – having taught music to her beloved pupils for over 70 years. I will always remember that I “am hers.”

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When I started this journey, I had no idea how much my life would change along the way. From moving to DC, to starting a new career, a new relationship, and abandoning my original dissertation, I could not have done it without the support of my advisors, friends, and family.

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over the couch when I needed it the most. Finally, I couldn't have done it without the emotional support of my dog Myla. She sat in my office while I typed every single word.

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Executive Summary

Affluent female adolescents are at an increased risk of adjustment problems and mental health concerns (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar et al., 2013). Despite financial advantages that afford them many opportunities, girls of higher socioeconomic status face increased pressure to succeed (Stiles, Lee, & Luthar, 2020). Excessive pressures to excel, particularly in affluent environments, is in the top four factors contributing to poor mental health in adolescents, along with exposure to poverty, trauma, and discrimination (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019). Unfortunately for many girls, this pressure results in adverse coping behaviors and negative outcomes, including anxiety and depression, sleep dysfunction, eating disorders, psychosomatic complaints, and suicidal thoughts (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Furthermore, the pressure may lead to problem behaviors including, substance abuse, cheating, bullying, sexual activity, and rule breaking.

Traditionally, influential proximal relationships, including, peers, parents, and adults at school, may aid in buffering and protecting adolescents from these adjustment problems (Luthar et al., 2019). However, researchers surmise that privileged teens turn to risky behaviors as a coping mechanism for stress and other mental health concerns, when traditional protective buffers such as peers, family, and school are dysfunctional (Ebbert et al., 2019; Luthar et al., 2019; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). Sources of dysfunction include, competition with peers (Lyman & Luthar, 2014), demands from parents (Williams, Lund, Liang, Mousseau, & Spencer, 2018), stress from advanced coursework and extracurricular activities in high achieving schools (Leonard et al., 2015; Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019) and anxiety from social media (Daly, 2018).

Teenage girls feel pressure to be feminine and beautiful (according to traditional societal constructs), yet sporty and competitive, or what Hinshaw and Kranz (2009) refer to as “supergirls.” Students attending high achieving schools face added stress during the highly selective college admission process (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Song, 2017). The demanding process of applying to college, coupled with pressure from their parents, peers, and schools, increase mental health diagnoses and risky behaviors (adjustment problems) in the affluent female adolescent population (Kovacs, 2008; Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, & Lund, 2018).

Quantitative Data

This needs assessment study employed a quantitative research method to describe adjustment problems in affluent female adolescents at a highly selective all-girls school (DBS) and identify and describe relevant contributing factors to this problem. The researcher used secondary data, collected in October of 2019, to examine the wellbeing of students, assess their risky behaviors, attitudes toward school, and their protective relationships. This quantitative survey answers the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are DBS students’ self-reported engagement in risk behaviors (i.e., drinking, drug use, sexual activity, bullying, and cheating) as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ2: What are DBS students’ reported mental health and wellness as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ3: What are DBS student attitudes about their grades, motivation, and school climate as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ4: What are DBS students' perceptions of their relationships with their peers, family, and teachers (traditional protective factors) as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

The purpose of this study was to further explore the problem of practice and understand the relevant contributing factors within the stated context. In other words, which factors or constructs are relevant to the wellbeing of students at DBS? With the growing concern about affluent youth being an at-risk population, the school elected to administer the Independent School Health Check survey and benchmark findings against a similar peer group of private, secondary institutions.

Quantitative data were collected approximately three months before COVID-19 arrived in the United States, and five months before the school moved to remote learning for the remainder of the school year. The data suggested concerning levels of mental wellbeing pre-pandemic. Once the 2020 pandemic ensued, and disrupted the college application cycle, it was important to understand how both the college application process and mental health of students were impacted by COVID-19. Therefore, the researcher collected qualitative data to better understand the mental health of a group of seniors at DBS as they underwent the college admission process in the midst of a global pandemic and quarantine.

Qualitative Data

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of affluent girls applying to college. The goals include highlighting the roles, supports, and resources available to students from parents, advisors, peers, along with documenting any pandemic related changes to the admission process. Additionally, knowledge gleaned from this research may inform recommendations on how young women can best

navigate the college process in future admission cycles and how educators can best support them during these moments. The research questions address potential changes to the admission process and how COVID-19 affected the students' protective factors while going through the college admission process.

RQ1: In what ways did the pandemic change students' college admission process?

RQ2: What was the role of parents in the admissions process during a pandemic?

RQ3: How do students' peers contribute to the college admission process during the pandemic?

RQ4: In what ways did advisors participate in the college admissions process and how did they support student during a pandemic?

RQ5: In what ways did the pandemic contribute to students' wellbeing?

Qualitative data collection included individual interviews with students and focus groups with parents and advisors. All interviews took place in November and December of the students' senior year. Therefore, they had submitted their college applications but in many instances were still waiting for an admission decision. Advisors and parents each had their own separate focus group with unique questions. Focus groups were chosen for the advisors and parents to learn more aggregate information about the senior class and to triangulate information provided by the students. The interview protocol relied on a semi-structured design using Turner's (2010) general interview guide approach. In this approach, the interview questions were prepared in advance, however, the interviewer had the flexibility to amend and ask follow-up questions. The interview and focus group transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for coding and analysis.

The author relied on an emergent research design to the qualitative analysis, which allows the researcher to be flexible, and open to making discoveries (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). They also created a series of a priori codes based upon the research questions. Lochmiller and Lester (2017) encourage the use of a priori coding, or predetermined codes, when relating or addressing a research question. The first round included descriptive coding and the second round looked for patterns, themes, and relationships. Through an iterative coding process and review of the final list of codes, five themes emerged. The themes included: forced to make college decisions without visiting, changes in standardized testing, privacy and control in the admission process, more time at home, and less contact with school adults.

In the context of this study, the impact of COVID-19 both harmed and improved student wellbeing. First, it forced students to make college decisions without visiting. For several students, this caused additional strain as it was difficult for them to create their college list and decide on an ED application. Yet, for other students, the inability to visit schools helped them focus their list and explore colleges virtually. Changes in standardized testing worsened the wellbeing of those who had not tested before the pandemic as they did not see testing as optional (despite the colleges removing the requirement).

One of the most significant findings in this study is that gaining privacy in the admission process benefited students and their wellbeing as they were physically separated from their peers and therefore, had control over with whom and what college information they shared. Another improvement to the girls' wellbeing was having more time at home. They had control over their schedule and more free time without all of their normal extracurricular activities. The students also benefited from spending more time with their parents, who served as a support system throughout the college admission process. Finally, as referenced in the discussion of spending

less time adults at school, it is unclear how this change impacted student wellbeing. While the students referenced the negative features of communicating on Zoom, they did not reference missing the support of their advisors.

Implications and Recommendations

While schools are moving back to “normal,” it is still unclear what the new normal will be. As highlighted throughout the qualitative findings, summary of key findings, and connecting quantitative and qualitative research sections of this chapter, the consequences of COVID-19 both harmed and improved student wellbeing during the college admission process. A notable finding was that having time away from peers lessened admission-related stress. With schools returning to in-person learning, it is an important reminder that while teenagers benefit from being together, they may also benefit from having some time apart. Of the other two primary support systems, parents and adults at school, only the relationship with the parents flourished during the pandemic. While students stated that their advisors were supportive, they did not rely on them during virtual learning and the college admission process and were able to manage on their own.

One lasting change in the college admission process is the continuation of colleges being test-optional or no longer requiring standardized test scores. During the 2020-2021 application cycle (represented in this study), Ivy League and highly selective colleges and universities saw a record number of applications. With test scores becoming optional, there were few barriers to the competitive admission process. Strong students with lower test scores are now in contention, creating more diversity in the applicant pool. As described in Chapter 1, prep schools in the Northeast, a traditional pipeline for Ivy League universities, have been facing greater competition and declining admission rates for the past decade. Conventional college “hooks”

such as being a legacy student or living in a wealthy zip code, no longer carry as much weight as colleges seek to expand diversity and equity on their campuses (Chace, 2013, p. 67). COVID-19 forced test scores out of the equation, making the competition even more challenging.

This is not to say that eliminating test scores is a negative factor, especially as it promotes access and equity in highly selective admissions. However, by using the word test “optional” may further exacerbate the need for affluent females to be “supergirls” or the need to be everything to everyone (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009). Taking the most demanding course loads, at the nation’s most rigorous high schools, perfect grades and test scores, may no longer be enough. Girls are already pressured to have a full schedule packed with extracurricular activities. Knowing how overscheduling may negatively impact mental health, it is worrisome to think about the future of this population and their desire to stand out in the highly competitive admission process. The bottom line is that while testing may be “optional,” nothing is deemed optional for girls in high achieving schools.

It is important to recognize that this population was struggling with significant mental health challenges before COVID-19. While at the same time, DBS and similar prep schools cannot ignore its \$50,000+ price tag and the expectations that accompany it. Following this study, the researcher recommends the short-term goal of embedding a mental wellness program within the college guidance curriculum, and long-term goals of studying the test optional movement, preparing students for a test-optional admissions process, and readministering the IHSC survey.

The short term, recommendation emerging from this study is the need to incorporate mental wellness into the college guidance curriculum. With evidence that DBS students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, they need to be educated on what they can and cannot

control in the process. They also need to have training on the dangers of rumination and the toxic culture it creates and healthy ways to internalize and externalize stress.

To aid in mental health education, the school should facilitate conversations on promoting a healthy college-going culture, including how to announce college decisions at school and on social media. As demonstrated in this study, having a break from being around peers while applying to college appeared to make the process less stressful. While it is impossible to recreate in a post-pandemic school environment, educating students about healthy relationships with peers regarding college is essential.

Parents also need to be included in conversations about mental health and college expectations. Well-educated themselves, there needs to be greater transparency of how significantly admission rates have declined in the last 20-40 years when they applied to college. More importantly, there needs to be greater transparency about the severity of mental health issues at DBS, the ramifications of a high-achieving culture, and ways to promote healthy expectations.

Long term, the college guidance office should conduct longitudinal research on the impact of colleges going test-optional. By collecting and learning from the data, the guidance office can better understand how colleges read test-optional applications and in turn, provide better advice to students as to whether they need the test. As demonstrated in this study, the test-optional movement impacts high achieving students' wellbeing as most do not consider it optional and it is one more stressor in the process.

While some may argue that colleges should be test free or test blind (not accept any standardized testing), this is a knee-jerk reaction to eliminating stress and ambiguity. Universities must first gather several years academic and retention data to glean information

about the success of their test-optional students – particularly Ivy League and other highly selective institutions, who are new to adopt a test-optional policy.

The second long term goal is to plan for test-optional policies to remain in place at many higher education institutions indefinitely. If test scores are no longer going to help affluent students stand out in the applicant pool, high schools need to facilitate meaningful programming and activities to help their students be compelling applicants at highly selective colleges and universities. Colleges are not looking for well-rounded applicants, rather, they need well-rounded classes, comprised of students with depth, expertise, and talent in their individual fields.

Not only will parents expect such activities (internships, independent projects, research, etc.), but if the school does not take the lead, students are at continued risk of overextending themselves. Independent schools are in the unique position to mindfully embed programming into their curriculums, so these opportunities do not become one more thing on a student's plate, and instead replace existing requirements in captivating ways.

Finally, it is recommended that the school revisit the results from the October 2019 IHSC survey and readminister the assessment for more accurate data about the wellbeing of students' post-pandemic. Only then will DBS learn about protective factors, stress points, and wellbeing in a post-pandemic year.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic forced schools into a virtual environment in a matter of days. Students, teachers, and families were plunged into months of quarantine, which fundamentally changed social dynamics. Through a literature review on the wellbeing of affluent female adolescents and a subsequent data collection of DBS students, it is clear that this population was at risk of and suffering from mental health issues prior to the pandemic. This

chapter contributes to the literature as it examined the wellbeing of a subset of affluent females applying to college during COVID-19.

The full impact of virtual learning and applying to college during the COVID-19 global pandemic will be researched for years to come. This small study unpacked the experience for a group of affluent females attending a high achieving school. While some may assume that the pandemic caused greater stress in the already pressure-filled college admission process, for several students, being away from the constant comparison among peers made the process surprisingly less stressful. Moreover, with the cancellation of activities and shift to virtual schooling, their once overscheduled lives slowed dramatically, allowing for more thoughtful conversations with family members and time to complete lengthy college applications.

The college application process itself also changed because of the pandemic, as students could not complete standardized testing. Colleges dropped this requirement for the 2020-2021 cycle. At the publication of this study, most universities have announced continuing this practice, citing greater access and diversity in their applicant pools. While the full impact of this decision is yet to be seen, for affluent females attending high achieving schools, it could continue lowering their chances of admission – exacerbating their pressure to be the best.

Chapter 1—Factors Contributing to Adjustment Problems in Female Adolescents in High Achieving Schools

While it may be surprising, affluent youth, upper-middle and upper class adolescents in predominantly two-parent, college-educated, white-collar families (Luthar & Barkin, 2012) are increasingly an at-risk population (Ebbert, Kumar, & Luthar, 2019; Korous, Causadias, Bradley, & Luthar, 2018; Lund & Dearing, 2013; Luthar, 2013; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar and D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019; Racz, McMahon, & Luthar, 2011; Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, & Lund, 2018). Frequently referred to as socioeconomically advantaged and privileged, these youth attend rigorous college preparatory schools with students scoring above-average standardized test scores, instructors implementing rich curricula with advanced courses, and ample extra-curricular activities (Luthar, Barkin, & Crossman, 2013).

One important construct to define is adolescent adjustment, or how teens navigate the transitions of young adulthood, including their mental health, behavior in school, relationships with peers and adults, and overall social-emotional functioning (Ebata & Moos, 1991). Another key construct is what defines a risk. To better understand what constitutes a risk, Masten (2001) describes a population as being at risk if their rate of problem behaviors and or psychological problems are statistically higher, given a specific condition. For example, while not all children of a depressed parent exhibit adjustment problems, on average, this population demonstrates higher instances of psychological risks compared to median rates (Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000).

It is well established that a primary risk factor of adjustment problems is socioeconomic status (SES) (Hanson & Chen, 2007; Korous et al., 2018). Luthar and D'Avanzo (1999) first

identified affluent youth as an at-risk group by happenstance when using this population as a comparison to behaviors of inner-city, low-income youth. To their surprise, the affluent group exhibited significantly higher usage of cigarettes, alcohol, marijuana, and hard drugs. In a second-order meta-analysis, Korous, Causadias, Bradley, and Luthar (2018) examined the link between SES and behavior problems. Across 12 meta-analyses, including 474 primary studies, the researchers found a U shape association between SES and behavior problems, with students at the lowest and highest SES levels, deemed most at risk. Of importance for this study, affluent girls tend to suffer from mental health issues at significantly higher rates compared to affluent males (Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & Goldstein, 2008).

Affluent female adolescents are at an increased risk of adjustment problems and mental health concerns (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar et al., 2013). Despite financial advantages that afford them many opportunities, girls of higher socioeconomic status face increased pressure to succeed (Stiles, Lee, & Luthar, 2020). Excessive pressures to excel, particularly in affluent environments, is in the top four factors contributing to poor mental health in adolescents, along with exposure to poverty, trauma, and discrimination (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019). Unfortunately for many girls, this pressure results in adverse coping behaviors and negative outcomes, including anxiety and depression, sleep dysfunction, eating disorders, psychosomatic complaints, and suicidal thoughts (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Furthermore, the pressure may lead to problem behaviors including, substance abuse, cheating, bullying, sexual activity, and rule breaking.

Traditionally, influential proximal relationships, including, peers, parents, and adults at school, may aid in buffering and protecting adolescents from these adjustment problems (Luthar et al., 2019). However, researchers surmise that privileged teens turn to risky behaviors as a

coping mechanism for stress and other mental health concerns, when traditional protective buffers such as peers, family, and school are dysfunctional (Ebbert et al., 2019; Luthar et al., 2019; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Lyman & Luthar, 2014). Sources of dysfunction include, competition with peers (Lyman & Luthar, 2014), demands from parents (Williams, Lund, Liang, Mousseau, & Spencer, 2018), stress from advanced coursework and extracurricular activities in high achieving schools (Leonard et al., 2015; Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019) and anxiety from social media (Daly, 2018).

So why should educators be concerned about privileged youth? Again, while this population attends some of the nation's top secondary schools, and seemingly have access to endless resources, there are serious consequences for adjustment issues and dysfunctional relationships (Luthar & Becker, 2002). The following section provides additional context for the importance of this problem, and in many instances, delineates how females (the focus of this study) face additional challenges from their male counterparts.

Adolescent Adjustment Problems in Affluent Youth

Teenage girls feel pressure to be feminine and beautiful (according to traditional societal constructs), yet sporty and competitive, or what Hinshaw and Kranz (2009) refer to as “supergirls.” Students attending high achieving schools face added stress during the highly selective college admission process (Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Song, 2017). The demanding process of applying to college, coupled with pressure from their parents, peers, and schools, increase mental health diagnoses and risky behaviors (adjustment problems) in the affluent female adolescent population (Kovacs, 2008; Spencer, Walsh, Liang, Mousseau, & Lund, 2018).

Affluent youth are specifically at risk of substance abuse (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Marmorstein et al., 2010; Racz, McMahon, & Luthar, 2011), younger and casual sexual activity

(Luthar & Goldstein, 2008), cheating (Ebbert et al., 2019), and other delinquent behaviors (Korous et al., 2018; Luthar et al., 2013; Luthar et al., 2019). Adolescents of higher SES often abuse substances such as alcohol and marijuana to aid with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005). Affluent youth also have easier access to illegal substances, including money to purchase the items, and lack of supervision at home (Hanson & Chen, 2007). Moreover, affluent youth tend to face fewer consequences for their adjustment problems, including collusion from parents and a lack of punishment from authorities due to their privilege (Luthar & Barkin, 2012).

Luthar and Goldstein (2008) studied substance use and related behaviors among affluent suburban teenagers related to the importance of perceived parent containment, or supervision. The sample included 258 11th graders in an affluent suburban community. They found significantly elevated substance use in girls compared to national norms. Additionally, adolescents in this study reported lower levels of parental monitoring and higher levels of parental tolerance for substance use. Notably, parents in this study cared more about their children being respectful to adults and school delinquency than they did underage substance abuse.

Substance abuse in girls can also contribute to the perception of each other and their peer group. For example, some female substance users can be seen as popular and well-liked, however, other females (more so than males), can be seen as the least liked, inferring a double standard for this population (Chase, 2008). The issue of drinking and popularity is only exacerbated in college, where underage drinking is not only socially acceptable but in many peer circles, a pre-requisite for social acceptance (Marano, 2005).

Between academic pressure, extracurricular involvement and tension within relationships, girls may internalize stress, often making it difficult for parents and educators to intervene as they are unaware that the child is suffering (Luthar & Kumar, 2018). Building upon Luthar and D'Avanzo's (1999) findings that wealthy children suffer from higher rates of anxiety and depression, Luthar and Barkin (2012) studied 302 affluent middle schoolers in a suburban community. Researchers collected data on the adolescents' depressive and anxiety symptoms, perceived pressures to achieve, isolation from adults, and academic information included grades and attendance records. Analysis of the data revealed significantly higher rates of depression for the girls in the study. Additionally, on average, girls reported a perceived lack of closeness with their mothers and less adult supervision after school.

Exploring differences in age, gender, and emotional wellbeing, Bluth et al. (2017) conducted a cross-sectional survey study of 765 7th through 12th graders in a small suburban school district in the Southeast. The researchers found that older girls had significantly lower levels of self-compassion, which were positively related to higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of overall wellbeing. For boys in the study, the opposite was true; high levels of self-compassion served as a buffer against high levels of stress. The authors argued that an intervention for teaching girls to be more self-compassionate might lower stress and anxiety levels.

With many teenagers overscheduled and under pressure, there is a growing concern of chronic sleep deprivation within this population (Tanner, 2015). Inadequate amounts of sleep have negative consequences, including diminished cognitive functioning and decreased overall health (Sarchiapone et al., 2014). Moreover, there is evidence that girls average fewer hours of sleep per night than boys (Sarchiapone et al., 2014). In researching hours of sleep in adolescents

and its association with anxiety, emotional concerns, and suicidal ideation, Sarchiapone et al. (2014) examined data from 11,788 students across 11 different European countries. The data revealed that older girls got the fewest hours of sleep. Additionally, lower hours of sleep were associated with greater emotional concerns, problems with peers, and higher levels of anxiety and suicidal ideation. In a similar study entitled “*Stressed and Losing Sleep*” *Sleep Duration and Perceived Stress Among Affluent Adolescent Females*,” DeSilva Mousseau, Lund, Liang, Spencer, and Walsh (2016) found a connection between perceived levels of stress and the effects on sleep patterns. The researchers cite the pressure to be “supergirls” (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009) as a probable cause, meaning they have to be everything to everyone.

Girls under stress may experience psychosomatic complaints or real physical symptoms that are influenced by emotions, including headaches and body pain (Ghandour, Overpeck, & Huang, 2004). School-related stress and parental pressure may contribute to a higher occurrence of psychosomatic complaints (Torsheim & Wold, 2001). In a study of the associations between stress, psychosomatic complaints, and parental criticism among affluent adolescent girls, Williams et al., (2018) hypothesized that girls experiencing higher levels of perceived stress would report higher levels of psychosomatic complaints. Additionally, they hypothesized the presence of critical parenting contributing to an increase in psychosomatic ailments. The sample included 218 high school students attending two different all-girls private schools. Data revealed a relationship between perceived stress, critical parenting, and psychosomatic complaints. The researchers concluded that affluent girls experiencing high levels of parental pressure might experience stress that manifests in physical ailments.

Another reason to be concerned about this is population is that female adolescent suicide rates are on the rise, particularly in girls from affluent communities (Mirick, Berkowitz, Bridger,

& McCauley, 2008). According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the second leading cause of death for youth aged 10-24, and the rate for females has doubled between 2007 and 2015 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017a). Furthermore, girls experiencing chronic stress and depression are at a higher risk of suicide and suicidal ideation (Miller et al., 2017).

Affluent youth may also be at a greater risk of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), including cutting, burning, and other forms of self-harm (Yates, Tracy, & Luthar, 2008). In a longitudinal study of high school students in two wealthy suburban high schools (one West Coast and one East Coast), researchers aimed to describe NSSI in affluent youth and the role of critical parenting. NSSI emerged as a “prominent and recurrent phenomenon” among the 1300 upper-class adolescents in the study, with nearly a third of the children reporting self-harm, a rate higher than the national average (Yates, Tracy, & Luthar, 2008, p. 59). Additionally, perceived parental criticism statistically predicted increased rates of NSSI.

Problem Statement:

Female adolescents in high achieving schools experience adjustment problems often as a result of the perceived high pressure “to be the best” (as 20 years of evidence clearly shows). Furthermore, relationships that traditionally buffer youth from adjustment problems may be dysfunctional. The next section presents a conceptual framework to guide a literature review of factors contributing to the problem and sets the stage for examining how adjustment problems manifest at an independent, all-girls school.

Conceptual Framework

After two decades of researching affluent adolescents in high achieving schools, Dr. Suniya Luthar, along with Drs. Nina Kumar and Nicole Zillmer, created a conceptual framework

of the confluence of forces implicated in elevated adjustment problems among high achieving school students (Luthar et al., 2019, p.4) (Figure 1.1). In the framework, the researchers diagram the problem (adjustment problems), the root cause (high pressure to “be the best”, constant stress, overextension) and the contributing factors (globalization, increased competition, “middle class squeeze”, technological advances: constant comparison with others, and “survival of the fittest” mentality – focus on status relative to peers). Additional contributing factors include the potential impairment of protective relationships (parents, peers, adults at school), and relevant individual attributes (self-worth, no real leisure).

Figure 1.1 Conceptual Framework

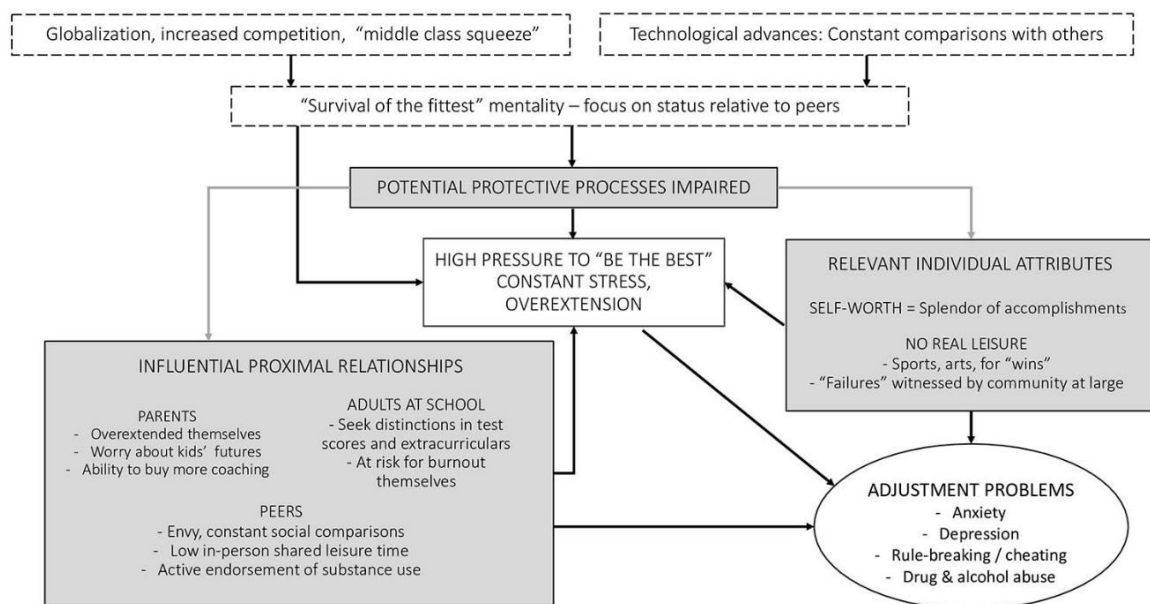


Figure 1.1 A conceptual framework of the forces connected to increased adjustment problems in high achieving schools. (Luthar et al., 2019, p.4).

While this conceptual model guides the review of the literature presented in this chapter, it is important to first examine the creation of the model. Luthar et al., (2019) utilized Bronfenbrenner's (1977, 2005) Ecological System's Theory (EST) as the theoretical

underpinning of the framework. This theory describes the various systems that contribute to human development (Figure 1.2). Broadly speaking, under EST, individuals are influenced by interactions within their relationships, including family and friends, and by interactions within their environments such as home and school. Additionally, individuals are influenced by social values, and how the system changes over time.

Figure 1.2. Ecological Systems Theory

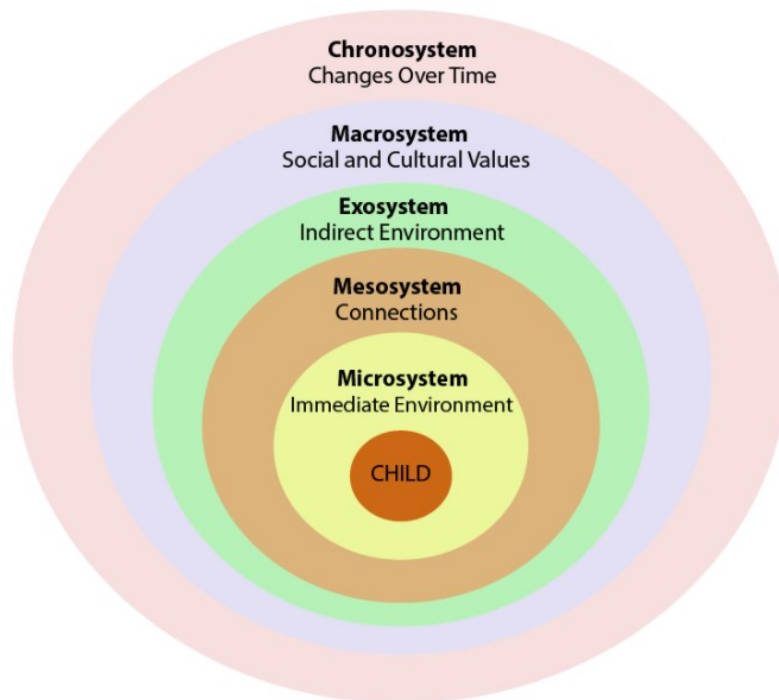


Figure 1.2. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory

Using ecological systems, Kumar, Luther, and Zillmer delineate influential proximal relationships via the microsystem (immediate environment) and mesosystem (connections or interrelations within the environment). However, they recognized the overarching role of culture as a contributing factor to the problem (high pressure to be “the best”) and how it permeates throughout the systems. Therefore, they also examined an extension of EST, Vélez-Agosto, Soto-Crespo, Vizcarrondo-Oppenheimer, Vega-Molina, and García Coll's Cultural Microsystems

Model (2017) (Figure 1.3). Velez-Agosto et al., (2017) furthers the evolution of EST by acknowledging the role that culture plays throughout the systems, not just the macrosystem. This is particularly useful for describing the exosystemic factors impacting girls, including the American culture of affluence and threats to maintaining an elevated socioeconomic status (Luthar & Kumar, 2018) and shows that it permeates all systems. Therefore, Kumar, Luther, and Zillmer's use of EST in developing their conceptual framework is effective in identifying factors within the various system that contribute to the problem of practice – adjustment problems in girls attending a high achieving school.

Figure 1.3. Cultural Microsystems Model

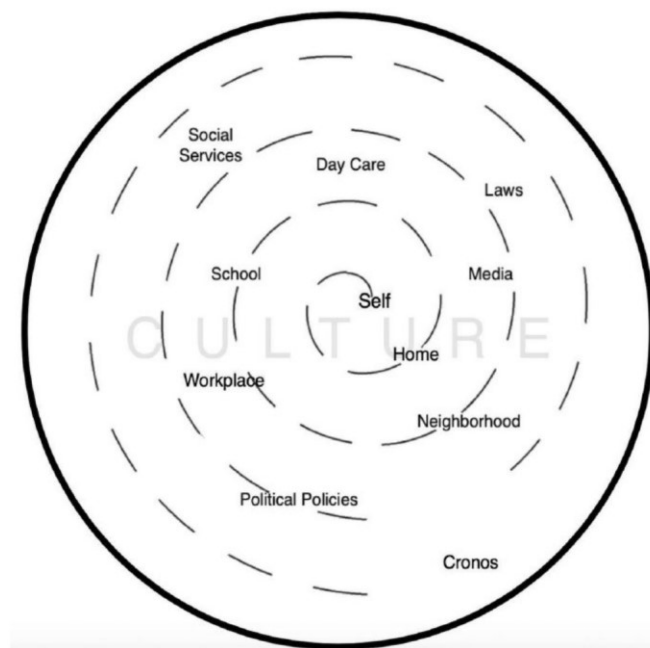


Figure 1.3. Cultural Microsystems Model (Velez-Agosto et al., 2017)

The conceptual framework is also grounded in theories of resilience (Luthar & Eisenberg, 2017) as it relates to both proximal and distal factors contributing to the problem. While the construct of resilience is not the subject of this dissertation, it is a construct that is woven throughout the literature review.

In line with the conceptual framework, this literature review will examine the potential factors contributing to adjustment problems in adolescents attending high achieving schools. The conversation will start with a broad look into the exosystemic factors affecting affluent youth, including the culture of affluence, maintaining status, the competitive college admission process, and the role of technology and social media. Next, it will cover the proximal factors contributing to adjustment problems, including relationships with parents, peers, and the school environment. Finally, the researcher will discuss individual factors contributing to adjustment problems, including, adolescent development and the impact of stress on the teenage brain, followed by gender specific risks to females, and perfectionism.

Exosystemic Factors Contributing to Adjustment Problems

This cohort of youth differs from those in previous decades in a few key ways. First, it may be harder to achieve their parents' level of financial wealth in success as the middle and upper-middle class is experiencing a financial squeeze due to widening income distribution in the U.S. (Luthar et al., 2019). Second, the college admission process is more competitive than at any point in history (Mehaffey, 2020). Finally, this generation communicates differently through the use of digital media, allowing for constant comparison among peers (Yau & Reich, 2019)

The culture of affluence. One may assume that children in wealthy families have endless resources and opportunities. And while to a large extent this is true, within the culture of affluence, only certain choices may be deemed acceptable, such as pursuing professional careers (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). Furthermore, material wealth does not equate to personal happiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Csikszentmihalyi (1999) argued that being wealthy creates a constant cycle of psychologically always needing to accumulate more, resulting in less time spent on leisure activities, family, and meaningful relationships. When material rewards

dominate one's sense of worth, other things like "friendships, art, literature, natural beauty, religion, and philosophy become less and less interesting" (as cited in Luthar, 2003).

Luthar (2003) further describes the paradox of the culture of affluence in that focusing on materialist rewards often leads to higher rates of divorce and increased unhealthy competition within friendships. Wealthier families may also be more physically separated from others as homes tend to be more spread apart, and often behind gates, resulting in isolation from a community. Finally, many wealthy individuals realize they are fortunate to have their resources and know that any complaining or appearing to be unhappy may make them appear as ungrateful or self-indulgent. Therefore, while an affluent culture may seem enviable to many, individuals within these small circles may suffer from a misdirected sense of self-worth and extreme unhappiness (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010).

Maintaining status. It may not be that wealth itself makes adolescents more susceptible to risky behaviors and mental health issues, but rather it is the community in which they reside. In a study exploring the relationship between family wealth and community wealth and the effect on affluent children, Lund and Dearing (2013) found that the most significant factor contributing to adjustment problems was the community. Researchers analyzed data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development using a sample of just over 1300 families across 10 research sites throughout the United States. Regardless of the level of family wealth, girls living in affluent communities had higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to youth in middle-class neighborhoods. Consequently, wealthy girls living in middle-class neighborhoods did not experience higher rates of mental health concerns. The researchers attribute this to living in a lower pressure environment and having a family who is living well within their means (Lund

& Dearing, 2013). In other words, they were surrounded by a culture which included a lower pressure to succeed, and their families were living comfortably without the stress of finances.

For most individuals, their career is directly linked to their SES and social status (Luthar, 2003). From a young age, children take cues from their parents as to which jobs are socially acceptable (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). In a qualitative study of perceived career options among affluent women, Lapour and Heppner (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with 10 White girls attending an elite private high school. The researchers chose grounded theory design for the study as they wanted to construct a theory based upon the lived experiences of the subjects. After analyzing the transcripts, emerging themes that influenced their career options included social class, perceptions of achievement, exposure to careers, and evaluation of career options.

Overall, the participants in this study placed a high value on achieving the best in their intended field. For example, one student would not consider being a nurse when she could be a doctor. Additionally, several girls expressed an interest in teaching or the arts but stated they could not do that as a job because it would not provide a stable and high income. Interestingly, none of the participants used the word “pressure” to achieve a specific career; rather, they used the word “expectation” (p. 484).

The college admission process. Applicants to highly selective colleges face stiffer competition than ever before. In the United States, the number of college applicants has nearly doubled since 1970, yet the enrollment size of elite colleges has remained relatively stable (Bound, Hershbein, & Long, 2009). According to *U.S. News and World Reports’* top 50 colleges in the U.S., the average acceptance rate dropped from 35.9% to 22.6% from 2006 to 2018 respectively (Mehaffey, 2020). Similarly, the average acceptance rate into an Ivy League college dropped from 16% to 6.4% during the same time period (Mehaffey, 2020). Former president of

Wesleyan University and Emory University, William Chace, outlined five probable causes for the increase in demand for America's elite institutions (Chace, 2013). First, culturally, Americans tend to strive for "the best" of things (p. 65). Second, there is a belief that a college degree from an American institution is the best way to secure a high paying job in the future. Third, there are more international students seeking education in America, particularly from China, India, and Korea. Fourth, the Common Application makes it easier for students to complete one universal application and submit it to hundreds of schools. Finally, there is a mentality in America's middle and upper-class that attending college is a requirement, and "young people can't conceive of any alternative" (Chace, 2013, p. 65).

Preparatory schools (i.e., prep schools) in the Northeast are particularly feeling the squeeze. Traditionally a pipeline of students for Ivy League institutions, applicants in this region are facing growing competition from other regions of the U.S., including an influx of students from California and a flood of international students requiring no financial aid (Perez-Pena & Anderson, 2012). Furthermore, prep school students who traditionally relied on high standardized test scores as a distinguishing aspect of their college application, face a doubling of the number of perfect SAT and ACT scores in the past five years (Sawyer, 2018). Conventional college "hooks" such as being a legacy student or living in a wealthy zip code, no longer carry as much weight as colleges seek to expand diversity and equity on their campuses (Chace, 2013, p. 67).

When approached thoughtfully, the college admission process can be a time of personal reflection, growth, and independence (Soodik, 2018). However clinical psychologist Michael Thompson describes it in this way,

The college admission process looks like a rite of passage, comes at the right time for a rite of passage, has some elements of a rite of passage, but does not work as a rite of passage to bring children through the separation-individualization phase of late adolescence. Getting to college makes everyone anxious, in the matter of a classic rite of passage, but it does not provide the climax, or the catharsis that psychologically supports the age-mates and other members of the community. Instead, it too often leaves everyone more anxious, exhausted, and feeling bad about themselves, not less anxious, energized, and proud of themselves for having survived (Thompson, 1990, p.13)

For some students, receiving rejection letters leads them to believe that all of their hard work over the past 13 years of education was a waste and that they have failed themselves and their families (Barth, 2010). Stossel (2004) described how a college acceptance has “mistakenly come to represent a moment of truth – a judgment day of sorts where the talented, the impressive, and the worthy, are sorted from the merely average; and hopeful youngsters learn whether they are destined for greatness or for unremarkable, middling lives” (p.33). A child’s success is now how family success is measured. Their extra-curricular and academic accomplishments are now also their parent’s accomplishments. “College entrance has become your final exam as a parent” (Marano, 2005).

Technology and Social Media

Technological advancements provide for constant access to social parallels. Teenagers and their parents are able to view the lives of their peers on full display and make comparisons on life benchmarks and achievements (Simmons, 2018). Not only does technology allow for a constant stream of images and accomplishments, but college admission databases such as

Naviance and Scoir allow families to see GPA, test score, and outcome data for applicants from their individual high school.

According to a 2019 Common Sense Media report, teenagers average over seven hours of screen time per day, excluding schoolwork (Rideout & Robb, 2019). However, girls and boys may engage with and be impacted by technology in different ways. Girls tend to be more relational and spend more time using technology to interact with their friends, while boys tend to use technology to play video games (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Additionally, girls spend more time caring about their online physical appearance, particularly their weight, and frequently compare themselves to images of their friends and celebrities (Yau & Reich, 2019).

In a study of adolescents in their social media usage, Yau and Reich (2019) conducted qualitative focus groups with 51, 12 to 18 year-olds. They found that most older girls only posted images of themselves that made them appear attractive and well liked. Additionally, most girls reported always thinking about the audience before posting images – often taking time to pose for pictures knowing they want to post the image on their social media account (Yau & Reich, 2019). The problem with only portraying positive images is that when others are making social comparisons to their own lives, they are seeing a skewed view of reality and may perceive any personal difficulties or struggles as being unusual and isolating (Fagan, 2017). While some may argue that social media use in teens leads to primarily negative consequences (Samuel, 2017), the research is mixed. In a study of social media usage and the impact on adolescent's wellbeing, Weinstein (2018) found many positive associations with social media, including closeness to others, self-expression, and exploration of interests.

Enhanced technology has also impacted the college admission process. Websites such as collegeconfidential.com, host forums where students can upload their high school profile (test

scores, GPA, extracurricular activities, etc.) and compare themselves to students with similar profiles and see admission decisions. Moreover, high schools use databases such as Naviance or Scoir to track application data points from their high schools. Students can login to their account and see the admission decisions for their school on a scatterplot of GPA and standardized test score, therefore seeing the odds of their admission at any given university. Access to this type of information can be helpful for giving families perspective on the competitive landscape of college admissions, but it can also become a toxic tool, further contributing to a state of perfection and the race to the top (Luthar et al., 2019).

While wealth provides a surplus of choices and opportunities (Luthar, 2013) it may also enhance the pressure to maintain family wealth and choose socially acceptable career paths (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). A benchmark of parental success is where their children attend college (Lapour & Heppner, 2009). Additional stressors to the process include, record low college admission rates (Mehaffey, 2020) and the public display of college acceptances on social media (Simmons, 2018). The following section reviews the proximal factors in greater detail, including relationships with parents, peers, and the impact of high achieving schools.

Proximal Factors Contributing to Adjustment Problems

Researchers posit that girls at high achieving schools are at an increased risk of the adjustment problems and mental health issues described above, partially because traditionally protective factors such as relationships with parents, peers, and schools are impaired (Luthar et al., 2019). Adolescents rely on relationships with close friends and adults to help them problem solve and buffer stressful situations (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995). Strains in traditionally protective relationships may impair a teenager's ability to cope and may further exacerbate perceived levels of stress and pressure to succeed (Luthar et al., 2019).

Parental Relationships

Relationships between parents and children within affluent families are complex and dynamic. Researchers contend these relationships foster more transparent communication and levels of support (Ramdahl, Jensen, Borgund, Samdal, & Torsheim, 2018), while others argue there is greater parental criticism paired with higher expectations (Ciciolla, Curlee, Karageorge, & Luthar, 2017). Additionally, many adolescents have varying relationships with their mothers versus fathers (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019). These relationships affect a child's wellbeing and are fundamental in a child's development and transition into adulthood (Schiffrin et al., 2019).

Wealth and parent-child relationships. In studying children of the affluent, researchers Luthar and Latendresse (2005) conducted a meta-analysis review of the population and found that adolescents of wealthy parents in many cases had no better child-parent relationship than children of lower SES. The latter are often living with harsh poverty conditions in single-parent homes. In both cases, children felt withdrawn and detached from their parents and guardians, albeit for contextually different reasons.

Family income and the parent-child relationship impacts young females' sense of purpose and self-esteem (Blattner, Liang, Lund, & Spencer, 2013). Finding a sense of purpose, or a direction in life, represents a developmental milestone in transitioning into adulthood, yet for some can be a stressful experience (Damon, 2004). Blattner et al. (2013) investigated the role of parents in forming a sense of purpose and the impact on self-esteem. The researchers hypothesized that children committing to a sense of purpose would positively impact self-esteem and that an alienating parental relationship would negatively interfere with discovering a sense of purpose and self-esteem, particularly in girls. The quantitative study included 207 students attending an independent, all-girls school, with predominately affluent families. As

hypothesized, girls who perceived their parental relationships as strained, reported more difficulty in finding a sense of purpose and in turn, reported lower levels of self-esteem. Contributing factors included lack of communication with parents, fear of rejection, and parents pushing their own sense of direction upon their children. Unhealthy parent-child relationships can be harmful because parents can serve as a protective buffer against stressful developmental events and girls and therefore having a positive parent-child relationship can help the child find their direction in life (Blattner et al, 2013).

In a similar study utilizing the same population, Liang et al., (2018) investigated how the parent-child relationship impacts the child's development of an other-oriented purpose versus a self-oriented purpose by utilizing hierarchical linear regression. With an other-oriented purpose, individuals are motivated by the desire to do the greater good for others. In contrast, in a self-oriented purpose, the individual is motivated by self-serving purposes. Developing an other-oriented purpose contributes to thriving in adolescence and may serve as a protective barrier for high achieving and affluent girls -- many of whom tend to suffer from extreme academic pressure, fear of failure, and perfectionism (Spencer et al., 2018) as there is intense pressure for this population to achieve extrinsic goals such as college admissions and elite careers (Liang et al., 2018). The researchers found that, on average, girls who reported a positive relationship with their parents, including open and trusting communication, were more likely to have an other-oriented sense of purpose compared to a self-serving sense of purpose. This study, again, illuminates the power of a positive and open parent-child relationship, particularly in affluent, high achieving girls.

In a study of how mothers and fathers value achievements and the implications for upper-middle-class youth, Ciciolla et al., (2017) collected data from 506 middle students attending a

predominately white, upper-class middle school. Students were asked to rank their perception of items that their mother and father individually valued and wanted them to achieve. Items included achievement goals such as attending a good college and excelling academically and intrinsic goals such as being respectful to others and helping those in need. The data revealed significant differences between perceptions of mothers and fathers, with fathers placing more value on achievement goals compared to mothers. On average, children with the highest psychosocial adjustment had perceptions that both of their parents valued intrinsic goals or were neutral and valued intrinsic goals and achievement goals equally. Interestingly, the average grades and reports from teachers for this group were better than those children who faced high achievement pressure. This research advances the literature stating that achievement pressure does not help a child develop and succeed academically (Ciciolla et al., 2017).

In an examination of wealth and parent-child relationships, Ramdahl et al., (2018) utilized data from the Norwegian study, “Health behavior in school-aged children 2013/2014”. Using a sample of 3383 children aged 11-15 years old, the researchers found that as family wealth increased (within 1 SD above and below the country’s mean family wealth) so did ease and frequency of communication within a family, as did familial support of the child. This study contradicts many studies of parent-child relationships in affluent families (Ciciolla et al., 2017; Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Warikoo, Chin, Zillmer, & Luthar, 2020) which found wealth may harm relationships. Ramdahl et al., (2018) argue that a possible cause is their study was conducted in Norway, whereas the studies mentioned above were conducted in the United States. The researchers hypothesized that one possible explanation is that adults in the U.S. work on average, 25% more hours per year, which equates to less time spent with the family (Ramdahl et al., 2018).

The role of the mother. Relationships between affluent mothers and their daughters are particularly complex as their quests for perfectionism converge (Luthar et al., 2013). These well-educated mothers are expected “to be, simultaneously, independent, achievement-oriented, successful, the equal to any man, and yet appealing to men, selfless, accommodating, nurturing, the connective tissue that holds all families together, and of course, slim and beautiful” (Douglass & Michaels, 2004, p. 325). While some mothers’ primary focus of taking care of the home, many are also managing formidable careers. While their husbands are also working long hours at powerful jobs, the women are still expected to effortlessly manage both their career and the household (Luthar et al., 2013). Not only are mothers dealing with their own pressure to be perfect, but they are also the primary support system for their high-achieving children who are frequently over-scheduled and suffering from significant amounts of stress and anxiety (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

Relationship with Peers

While traditionally a protective factor, adolescent pressure and stress may come from competition and ranking among peer groups (Luthar et al., 2013). Relationships with peers, especially in girls, is a fundamental part of psychological wellbeing. Therefore, negative peer experiences can result in anxiety, depression, and other adjustment problems (Sontag, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 2008).

While boys may be outwardly more competitive within friendships, competition among girls may be more internalized (Singleton & Vacca, 2007). In a study of how relationships impact women during their transition to adulthood, Haydon (2015) studied 233 women attending a college in the Northeast. The researcher measured anxiety, perceived parental over-involvement, quality of friendships, comparison to peers, and transitional stress (taking on adult

responsibilities) via a quantitative survey. Haydon found a positive relationship between increased levels of stress and high levels of over-parenting. Additionally, there was a positive relationship between high levels of stress and feeling behind peers; however, this did not appear to impact the quality of friendships. The researcher highlighted the complex psychological aspects of peer support in that even though young females may compare themselves against their peers; it does not necessarily diminish the strength and protective qualities of friendships (Haydon, 2015).

In a quantitative study comparing high achieving 11th and 12th graders at an elite private school and an inner-city low SES magnet school, Lyman and Luthar (2014) measured substance use, self-awareness, alienation from parents, parent criticism and expectations, parent depression, social interactions, sexual harassment, envy, perfectionism, body dissatisfaction, and goal orientation. The two most significant areas where the traditionally at-risk group (low SES) had the advantage over the affluent population was in substance abuse (covered earlier in this chapter) and peer envy. One possible explanation is that while the lower SES group is envious of people and things they see on television, for the affluent group, these things are right within their grasp. For example, it is easier to believe that admission to Harvard is within your reach when you observe classmates gaining admission (Simmons, 2018). Another possible explanation is that “the race is very tight to get ahead of others on the status scale relative to peers and one point on the scale that someone else earns implies that one’s own relative status is set back by the coveted point” (Lyman & Luthar, 2014, p. 913).

Similarly, in a study of peer-perceived admiration and social preferences, Becker and Luthar (2007) collected quantitative data from 636 middle schoolers – half in a low SES setting and a half in a high SES context. The researchers examined relationships among SES and

rebellious behaviors, academic application, and physical attributes. While the two groups admired many of the same traits in their peer group, such as academic applications and small rebellious behaviors, high SES girls valued physical attractiveness and non-physical aggression, including the ability to manipulate their peers. This finding supports the “mean girls” mentality in that girls who enforce their social dominance and capital tend to be more popular (Ebbert et al., 2019; LaFontana & Cillessen, 2002; Luthar et al., 2013).

High Achieving Schools

Students attending high achieving schools (HAS) come from mostly middle and upper-class families with nearly 100 percent of graduates pursuing higher education (Ebbert et al., 2019). HAS often provide rich and rigorous curriculum and a wide array of co-curricular activities (Feld & Shusterman, 2015). While many are private or independent schools, public HAS are often located in affluent suburban communities.

The pressure to achieve contributes to parents investing in private education for their children, even when the cost of education has increased exponentially (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2019). There is evidence that adolescents absorb this pressure, which may contribute to a significantly greater risk of depression (Schiffrin et al., 2019). It is understandable that parents would want to send their child to a HAS due to all of the opportunities it affords. It is also vital, however, that families and school administrators remember that “it can be emotionally stressful if the child arrives in a particularly high-achieving environment” (Pekrun et al., 2019, p.166).

In a 2015 to 2019 quantitative study of 7,500 students across nine high-achieving schools, Luthar (2019) found above average rates of anxiety and depression in each of the nine schools with an average depression rate of 6-7 times the national average. Moreover, the average of students feeling withdrawn was 3-4 times national averages. “Research evidence from the

past 20 years has shown that at the core of all these problems is one overarching cause, and that is the *unrelenting pressures to accomplish* ever more and distinguish oneself as among the best” (Luthar & Kumar, 2018, p.441).

In a study entitled, *Into the pressure cooker: Student stress in college preparatory high schools*, Feld and Shusterman (2015) collected data from 322 students across two HAS (one public and one private) to study the psychological, physical, and behavioral health of students in high achieving settings. Analysis of the quantitative data revealed several key findings. First, females reported significantly higher levels of stress compared to males with average scores of ($M = 3.46$, $S.D. .95$) and ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.10$), respectively (stress was evaluated on a 1-5 scale). Second, students reported significant levels of psychological and physical responses to stress, including problems with eating, sleeping, and substance abuse. Third, students attending the private school reported greater satisfaction with their teachers, better attitudes toward school, and higher levels of motivation compared to their public-school peers in the study; however, they reported significantly lower levels of the perception of their personal academic abilities. Moreover, lower perception of their personal abilities was inversely correlated with higher levels of stress and higher importance placed on success in school when controlling for the student’s GPA. In other words, a student's level of stress was tied to their perception of academic ability, not necessarily happiness.

Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Adolescent Health (1994-1995), Coley, Sims, Dearing and Spielvogel (2018) designed a study to delineate problem behavior risks by family income, neighborhood, and school contexts. The researchers used data collected from 13,179 high school students across varying SES nationwide. Data analysis included descriptive statistics and multilevel regression. Student and behavior health factors served as the

dependent variables, and income the independent variable. To aid in controlling for demographic factors, the researchers added a variety of demographic covariates. The findings revealed risky behavior associated with high and low SES, with peer SES being the most significant predictor of adjustment problems. In other words, peer wealth had the highest correlation with behavioral and mental health outcomes. Students attending schools with predominately lower SES students reported higher levels of depression, anxiety, and violent crime. In contrast, students in more affluent contexts reported higher levels of intoxication, drug use, and property crime. The researchers concluded that while problem behaviors and mental health issues occur at both ends of the economic spectrum, the school context may be a more powerful indicator than family and neighborhood incomes. Therefore, all students, regardless of income, may face heightened maladaptive mental and behavioral risks by attending a highly affluent school.

All-girls school environments. Schools are places where adolescents can gain confidence through developing friendships and social skills (Cribb & Haase, 2016). For many girls attending affluent schools, high achievement becomes a part of their identity (Låftman, Almquist, & Östberg, 2013). While there is evidence to support that girls attending single gender schools have greater self-esteem (Cribb & Haase, 2016), they may be less risk averse and more competitive (Booth & Nolen, 2012; Laury et al., 2019) compared to girls attending coeducational schools. Moreover, being in a high-performing context may further exacerbate stress levels, especially in an all-girls environment, where students ruminate and talk to each other about the pressures of school (Låftman et al., 2013).

However, there are mixed reviews on how attending single-sex schools impacts girls (Gross-Loh, 2014). According to the American Association of University Women, there is no concrete evidence to support that single-sex education is more beneficial for girls than a

coeducational environment (Lamb, 2000). While the National Coalition of Girls' School differs arguing, "largely absent from the debate has been hard, scientific data assessing the defining characteristics of girls' schools, including raising girls' academic achievement, increasing the numbers of females in science and math classes, benefiting female career aspirations, and leading to more positive sex-role attitudes and self-esteem" (Lamb, 2000, p. 3). Regardless, the number of all-girls schools has increased dramatically over the past decade (Pahlke, Bigler, & Patterson, 2014).

Teachers and staff. Teachers in high achieving schools can either buffer students from stress or they can exacerbate the stress (Luthar & Kumar, 2018). There is pressure from parents, administrators, and communities to maintain traditional achievement measurements such as high standardized test scores and admission to elite colleges. In other words, the success of the school, in large part, is measured by the success of its students, and teachers and coaches play a large role in shaping student accomplishments (Luthar & Kumar, 2018).

Students at high achieving schools may internalize their stress as opposed to acting out as many at-risk youth of lower socioeconomic status (Luthar, Kumar, & Zillmer, 2020). Internalizing behaviors often makes it difficult for teachers and administrators to identify students in need of care as many "fly under the radar" (Flett, Hewitt, Nepon, & Zaki-Azat, 2018, p. 357). Therefore, there is a growing need for teachers to be aware of the mental health issues inflicting their students in high-achievement settings (Luthar et al., 2020). However, some teachers may stereotype wealthy parents as being overbearing and fear intervening in a child's wellbeing due to powerful and litigious parents (Luthar et al., 2013). In a study of school-based mental health providers stereotypes about wealthy parents, Luthar et al., (2020) found that the health providers perceived the parents to have "negative and defensive attitudes regarding their

children's vulnerabilities" however, they were still more likely to pursue treatment recommendations for their children compared to parents of lower socioeconomic status (p. 11).

Alternatively, strong relationships with their teachers may help young females feel more empowered and increase their self-esteem (Archard, 2012; Blattner et al., 2013; Spencer et al., 2018). Liang, Lund, Desilva Mousseau, and Spencer (2016) studied the mediating role of engagement in mentoring relationships and self-esteem among affluent adolescent girls. Using a sample of 207 students attending two similar all-girls school high schools, the researchers administered a quantitative survey and found girls who reported a strong mentoring relationship with a teacher also reported higher levels of self-esteem. Similarly, in a study of mentoring relationships in an all-girls school context, Archard (2012) found that female teachers may serve as role models and enhance the leadership skills of their students. In addition to providing support, it is thought that mentoring relationships help adolescents develop empathy and shift their focus to problems to something greater than themselves (Liang, Spencer, West, & Rappaport, 2013).

Schoolwork. Homework has been consistently linked with positive academic outcomes, including higher grade point averages, and positive behavior in schools (Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2009; Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2013; Kralovec & Buell, 2000). With decreasing college admission rates and increasing global competition in education, parents in high achieving schools often push for teachers to issue more homework as they see it as a vehicle for their children to gain an academic edge (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). However, most students in these contexts report homework as being a significant form of stress and something that dominates their time outside of school (Conner et al., 2009). Furthermore, excessive amounts of homework

have been linked to physical health concerns, lack of sleep, and forgoing time with family and friends (Kralovec & Buell, 2000).

In a study of the nonacademic effects of homework in privileged, high achieving high schools, Galloway, Conner, and Pope (2013) collected survey data from 4,317 students across ten high achieving schools in upper-middle-class communities. The aims of the study were to examine the relationship between homework and student wellbeing and to understand how homework influences their levels of stress. Control variables included demographic information and individual school effects. Data analysis revealed that on average, students spent 3.11 hours per school day on homework with girls, older students, and students attending private schools exceeding the average. Additionally, 72% of students reported being “often” or “always being stressed over schoolwork; 82% reported at least one physical symptom resulting from homework; 68% reported not getting enough sleep due to completing homework; 63% reported not spending enough time with friends or family, and 61% reported having to drop an activity that they enjoyed because of the time required to complete homework. In sum, while students engaging in more homework had higher grade point averages, they also had more health problems, stress, and poor school/life balance (Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013).

Extra-curricular involvement. Children in affluent families are often raised by what Lareau (2003) defines as “concerted cultivation” or parents fostering their children’s growth and talents through participation in organized activities. This parenting style includes teaching children how to communicate and reason with adults, which are skills deemed valuable skills that translate to the classroom and, eventually, the workforce (Lareau, 2003). Children who participate in extra-curricular activities may benefit from greater psychological and social development (Randall & Bohnert, 2012). As children transition into teenagers, there is more

emphasis on extra-curricular development for the competitive college admission process (Schwebel & Yang, 2016). Some adolescents feel excessive pressure from their parents to succeed in their activities (Luthar & Becker, 2002) and lose valuable family time from their already overscheduled households (Luthar & Avanzo, 1999).

In a study of extra-curricular involvement among affluent youth, Luthar, Shoum, and Brown (2006) explored the commonly held belief that overscheduling children has negative consequences for their development. The researchers surveyed 314 eighth-graders in a middle-upper class, suburban community. What they found is that it is an absence of involvement in the activities themselves that can be harmful, but that negative consequences stem from children feeling undue pressure from their parents to excel in the activities. Therefore, it may not be time spent participating in activities that is harmful but rather the pressure to succeed that is worrisome for affluent youth.

Increasingly, high achieving students are no longer participating in activities that they enjoy, but rather what they think will stand out on college applications (Bound et al., 2009). For some, there is an unhealthy focus on crafting the perfect college application and attempting to manufacture the appearance of being a well-rounded applicant while at the same time demonstrating excellence in unique or obscure areas (Bound et al., 2009). Many students have resorted to asking, “will this look good on my resume?” before deciding which activities to pursue throughout high school instead of picking things they may enjoy (Redding, 2013, p. 35).

To explore the wellbeing of adolescents participating in organized activities, Melman, Little, and Akin-Little, (2007) collected quantitative survey data from 90 students attending a high achieving school in New York, where 98% of the graduates attend college, and 18% attend an Ivy League institution. The intent of the study was to identify any potential relationship

between the number of hours spent in extra-curricular activities and symptoms of anxiety, somatization, and depression. Researchers found a linear relationship between the number of hours spent on activities and levels of anxiety, yet a similar relationship did not exist for symptoms of somatization and depression. Consistent with the literature, anxiety levels were higher for females in the study compared to males. Additionally, the majority of the students in the study reported the need to participate in activities in order to be a competitive applicant in the college admission process (Melman et al., 2007).

Individual Factors Contributing to Adjustment Problems

Transitioning to adulthood is a time of complex changes in the brain (Romeo, 2013). Hormonal changes combined with complex social situations predisposes adolescents to adjustment problems (Rudolph, 2002). In examining differences between genders (recognizing individuals may be nonbinary, gender fluid or transgender) girls are affected by stress in different ways from boys, including internalizing distress and aggression (Sontag et al., 2008). This portion of the literature review discusses individual factors contributing to adjustment problems including stress and the adolescent brain, gender-specific risks, and perfectionism.

Stress and the Adolescent Brain

Many physiological and psychosocial changes occur throughout adolescence (Romeo, 2013; Rudolph, 2002; Sontag, Graber, Brooks-Gunn, & Warren, 2008). Puberty sparks continued neural maturation or permanent progressive changes, within the stress-sensitive limbic and cortical regions of the brain (Stiles & Jernigan, 2010). Additionally, transformations in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis reactivity increase stress-induced hormonal responses (Romeo, 2013). Researchers believe these hormonal changes may contribute to psychological issues frequently exhibited in teenagers, including anxiety, depression, and substance abuse

(Rudolph, 2002). Moreover, prolonged exposure to stressors may negatively contribute to neurobehavioral development, or the development of cognitive, sensory, language, and social-emotional function (Romeo, 2013).

High achieving students face these challenges during a biological time of transitioning into adulthood. Many adolescents may not be developmentally equipped to handle the stress of overloaded schedules and the rigor of advanced course work, all of which are required in the competitive college admission process (Stegmeir, 2018). Neurologically, the frontal lobe of teenagers is not fully formed, and the limbic and cortical regions are still maturing, which limits their ability to problem solve, control their emotions, and effectively manage competing priorities (Eiland & Romeo, 2013).

In a study examining the connections among stress, coping skills, negative emotions and affect, and academic performance, Arsenio and Loria (2014) found significant relationships. On average, students with higher levels of negative emotions, and lower levels of coping skills, had lower grade point averages (GPA's) and higher levels of academic stress. Interestingly, however, there was no relationship between academic stress and academic performance (GPA). The authors concluded that how students deal with academic stress contributes to performance rather than the mere presence of academic stress. For example, students exhibiting disengaged coping behaviors such as denial and avoidance had lower GPA's. Therefore, developing positive coping skills may help to mitigate academic stress.

Gender-Specific Risks

How girls navigate the psychological and physical effects of stress during the transition into adulthood can have a lasting effect on their health and development, including the ability to cope and navigate social settings throughout adulthood (Petersen & Hamburg, 1986). Girls are

affected by stress in different ways from boys, including internalizing distress and aggression as Mcalister (2018) stated:

Girls not only have to be as smart or smarter than their male peers, they need to be effortlessly perfect – intelligent, attractive, funny and fit without appearing to try too hard. They need to juggle school, extra-curricular activities, technology, friendships and family with smiles and aplomb (p. 40).

In an examination of gender differences in emotional responses to interpersonal stress during adolescence, Rudolph (2002) examined the increased rates of anxiety and depression in females compared to males. Rudolph posited four hypotheses as a possible explanation: (a) girls experience more internalized stress during adolescence compared to boys; (b) girls have more negative emotional reactions to interpersonal stress compared to boys; (c) prolonged exposure to interpersonal stress leads to anxiety and depression; (d) girls are highly relational and exhibit higher levels of interpersonal sensitivity than boys (Rudolph, 2002). In a 2019 longitudinal study, Rudolph and colleagues found that chronic interpersonal stress during adolescence had lasting negative health impacts for girls and not boys (Owens et al., 2019). In sum, girls experience higher levels of stress in their familial and peer relationships and perceive adverse interpersonal events to be more stressful than what boys experience in relationships, which may have lasting adverse consequences including mental health challenges such as depression, anxiety, and low self-worth (Rudolph, 2002).

Perfectionism

Girls in high achieving environments may be more susceptible to perfectionistic traits (Mcalister, 2018). Perfectionism is defined as people having excessively high expectations, often setting unachievable goals and measuring their self-worth on elements of success (Lo &

Abbott, 2013). Maladaptive dimensions of perfectionism include never feeling good enough, fear of failure, inflexibility, neurosis, and being critical of oneself, often resulting in lower self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Hamachek, 1978). Individuals with perfectionistic traits may also suffer from higher rates of rumination (James, Verplanken, & Rimes, 2015).

In researching perfectionism in academically talented youth, Ablard and Parker (1997) studied 127 sets of middle schoolers and their parents. The survey data revealed that on average, parents who valued performance goals such as earning good grades over learning goals such as understanding material had children who exhibited more perfectionistic tendencies. These children reported higher than average rates of fear of making mistakes, doubting their abilities, and disappointing their parents.

To better understand the relationship between affluence and an elevated risk for psychosocial distress among adolescent females, Spencer et al. (2018) conducted in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with three cohorts of girls, their parents, and teachers over two consecutive years. The sample included 58 sixth, eighth, and tenth graders, 54 parents, and 21 teachers from two independent girls' schools in the Midwest and Northeast. A thematic analysis revealed four common sources of stress: (a) pressure to perform, (b) narrow definition of success, (c) peer competition, and (d) a misalignment in expectations between some girls and their parents. On average, the 10th-grade girls reported the highest stress levels compared to their younger peers, often citing the importance of gaining admission to an elite college. An important theme throughout the interviews was that the girls felt like they were "swimming in a sea of pervasive stress" (Spencer et al., 2018, p. 11). Teachers often cited perfectionistic tendencies in the girls, yet also acknowledged the internal pressure they feel to prepare their students for the competitive college admission process.

Conclusion

Affluent female adolescents are at an increased risk of adjustment problems and mental health concerns (Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar et al., 2013). Contributing exosystemic factors include the overarching pressure to succeed and maintain wealth in the American culture (Lund & Dearing, 2013; Luthar, 2003) and a sign of success is often measured by entry into a highly selective college or university (Barth, 2010; Chace, 2013; Marano, 2005; Stossel, 2004; Thompson, 1990). Moreover, widespread technological advances and social media usage, propagate social comparisons (Fagan, 2017; Simmons, 2018; Yau & Reich, 2019).

Proximal factors contributing to adjustment problems include relationships with parents, peers, and adults at school. In affluent adolescents, often these protective influential relationships are impaired, contributing to maladaptive behaviors and mental health concerns (Jessor et al., 1995; Luthar et al., 2019). Finally, there are individual factors contributing to the problem, including neurobiological transitions into adulthood (Romeo, 2013), gender specific risks (Rudolph, 2002), and perfectionism (Mcalister, 2018).

The large-scale problem presented in this chapter explored factors that potentially contribute to adjustment problems, which include maladaptive behaviors and mental health concerns. The next chapter explores how adjustment problems manifest at one high-achieving all-girls school as well as students' perceptions of potential factors contributing to those adjustment problems.

Chapter 2 – How Adjustment Problems Manifest at an All-Girls High Achieving School

As demonstrated in the review of the literature, affluent youth are at risk for a series of adjustment problems, including substance abuse, sexual behavior, cheating, bullying, and other delinquent activities (Luthar et al., 2013). Additionally, there are concerns about mental health problems, including stress, depression, anxiety, perfectionism, eating disorders, disordered sleeping, and other social adjustment issues (Luthar & Becker, 2002). The subsequent discussion describes the context of the study, including the methodology, data collection, data analysis, and findings.

Context of the Study

The research site for this study is a highly selective, all-girls school with grades 4-12, located in an urban area of a major Mid-Atlantic city. DBS (pseudonym) is religiously affiliated, yet highly progressive. Tuition for the 2020-2021 academic year is \$47,350, with 19% of the class receiving financial assistance. Nearly 40% of the class identifies as a student of color, with African American and Asian students representing the largest minority populations. The city in which the school is located has a global and transient population, with many individuals working in various aspects of governmental work. The average class size is 75 girls per grade level. The college preparation standardized test score averages (SAT and ACT) are in the 98th percentile nationally, and 100% of DBS graduates matriculate to a four-year college.

DBS is one of the most rigorous schools in the region, both in terms of admission into the school and the quality of the academic offerings. Approximately one-third of the girls attended the affiliated co-educational Pre-K-3 school before enrolling at DBS. Another third matriculated from a different school and started at DBS in the fourth grade. The remaining third enrolled in the Upper School starting in the ninth grade. The competitive admission process includes a

series of testing and interviews. Therefore, for some students, applying to elite private high schools offers a glimpse into the competitive college admission process, and reinforces the pressure to be the best.

Purpose of Study and Research Questions

This needs assessment study employed a quantitative research method to describe adjustment problems in affluent female adolescents at a highly selective all-girls school and identify and describe relevant contributing factors to this problem. Chapter two uses secondary data, collected in October of 2019, to examine the wellbeing of students, assess their risky behaviors, attitudes toward school, and their protective relationships. This quantitative survey answers the following four research questions:

RQ1: What are DBS students' self-reported engagement in risk behaviors (i.e., drinking, drug use, sexual activity, bullying, and cheating) as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ2: What are DBS students' reported mental health and wellness as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ3: What are DBS student attitudes about their grades, motivation, and school climate as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

RQ4: What are DBS students' perceptions of their relationships with their peers, family, and teachers (traditional protective factors) as measured by the Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey?

The purpose of this study was to further explore the problem of practice and understand the relevant contributing factors within the stated context. In other words, which factors or constructs are relevant to the wellbeing of students at DBS? With the growing concern about

affluent youth being an at-risk population, the school elected to administer the Independent School Health Check survey and benchmark findings against a similar peer group of private, secondary institutions.

Method

The following section provides an overview of the data set, participants, the instrument, and the constructs of the chapter.

Data Set

The dataset used is secondary data and was originally collected by administrators at DBS. DBS officials administered the ISHC survey to identify factors most relevant to student wellbeing. Since there are many variables identified as being relevant to affluent at-risk youth, administering a quantitative assessment helped to isolate factors specific to this context. A letter and email were sent to all parents of Upper School Students notifying them of the survey and the ability to withdraw their child from the study if requested. The Head of School permitted the use of secondary data for this study (Appendix A).

Participants

At the time of this empirical investigation in October of 2019, DBS's Upper School (grades 9-12) had a total enrollment of 299 students. Before administering the survey, school officials sent a notice to all parents and guardians giving them the option to opt their child out of participating in the survey. Approximately 92% of the total upper school population completed the survey for a sample size of 276.

Instrument

The Independent School Health Check (ISHC) survey measures student behavior and attitudes, including risk and protective factors. Independent school researchers Peter Wells and

Rosemary Baggish developed the survey in 2006 with oversight from Dr. Michael Stevens, Director of Child and Adolescent Research at Institute of Living at Hartford Hospital in Hartford, CT (independentschoolhealth.com). After a year of focus groups and input from independent school administrators and counselors, the survey was piloted in 2008. The Institutional Review Board of Hartford Hospital approved the survey and data collection (independentschoolhealth.com).

The survey is specifically designed for Upper School students in grades 9-12 and consists of 110 questions with the option for individual schools to add up to five customized questions. Students answer the questions anonymously and it typically takes 30-45 minutes to complete. Over 130 elite, independent schools have participated in the survey since its inception, including over 86,025 students, providing a robust set of comparative data. This database has been used by a variety of researchers who presented at the National Association of Independent Schools and the American Psychiatric Association (Hoof, Sherwin, Baggish, Tacy, & Meehan, 2004; Wells & Baggish, 2018).

Constructs. As demonstrated in the review of the literature, affluent youth are at risk for a series of maladaptive behaviors, including substance abuse, sexual behavior, cheating, bullying, and other delinquent activities (Luthar et al., 2013). The survey includes questions about how students live their lives within the school environment, at home, and in their community. For example, students are asked to report if and how many times they engaged in drinking, drug use, and sexual activity in the past 30 days. Students are also asked about their online behavior such as engaging in conversations with people they do not know and engaging in harassing or bullying behaviors through social media. Moreover, students are not only asked

about their engagement in risky activities but also their perception of how often their peers within the school engage in maladaptive behaviors.

Additionally, there is a concern for mental health problems, including stress, depression, anxiety, perfectionism, eating disorders, disordered sleeping, and other social adjustment issues (Luthar & Becker, 2002). Students were asked a series of questions related to their exercise, nutrition, and sleep behaviors. They also responded to questions about their source of motivation and work ethic, how much pressure they feel from their parents and teachers, and how often they feel comfortable talking to friends. Finally, students were asked questions about their mental health, including whether they have received a medical diagnosis, participated in counseling or treatment, and have or are currently taking any prescription medication for medical conditions. Table 2.1 summarizes the constructs, their definitions, indicators, and relevant citations.

Table 2.1

Constructs Related to Wellbeing in Adolescents Girls

Construct	Definition	Indicator	Citations
Risky behaviors	Maladaptive behaviors, including substance abuse, sexual behavior, cheating, bullying, and other delinquent activities (Luthar et al., 2013).	ISHC sample questions include: <i>“During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have at least 1 drink of alcohol, without parental consent?”</i> and <i>“Have you been bullied at this school?”</i>	Ebbert et al., 2019; Korous et al., 2018; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar et al., 2013; Luthar et al., 2019; Marmorstein et al., 2010; Racz, McMahon, & Luthar, 2011
Mental health	Includes stress, depression, anxiety, perfectionism, eating disorders, disordered sleeping, and other social adjustment issues (Luthar & Becker, 2002).	ISHC sample questions include: <i>“My general health is X.”</i> and <i>“During the past year, did you ever feel so sad or hopeless almost every day for two weeks or more in a row that you stopped doing your usual activities?”</i>	Bluth et al., 2017; Luthar & Barkin; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar & D'Avanzo 1999; Miller et al., 2017; Sarchiapone et al., 2014; Tanner, 2015; Williams et al., 2018
Student attitudes	Includes student perceptions of grades, motivation, and school climate (Luthar & Kumar, 2018)	ISHC sample questions include: <i>“For me to be successful in this school, it is important for me to excel in X”</i> and <i>“The following factors motivate me to do my school work”</i>	Archard, 2012; Blattner et al, 2013; Conner et al., 2009; Galloway, Conner, & Pope, 2013; Kralovec & Buell, 2000;
Protective factors	Relationships with close friends and adults to help them problem solve and buffer stressful situations (Jessor et al., 1995). Traditionally protective factors include relationships with parents, peers, and schools are impaired (Luthar et al., 2019).	ISHC sample questions include: <i>“Do you have a friend/peer to talk to on a regular basis about what is going on in your life?”</i> and <i>“The adults (parents or guardian) who are primarily responsible for caring for me have rules and holds me accountable”</i>	Ebbert et al., 2019; Låftman et al., 2013; Luthar et al., 2019; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Lyman & Luthar, 2014

Procedure

The purpose of this section is to describe the original data collection and analysis of the secondary data. Participating students took the ISHC survey during a common co-curricular period built into the typical school day. Students received an electronic link to the survey and took the survey on their personal or school-issued computers.

Data Analysis

Comparison benchmarks are from the ISHC national database of 25,101 females in 60 schools (both co-ed and single sex) surveyed in the last three years. To understand the relationships between variables, the researchers utilized a chi-squared analysis. This quantitative test aimed to detect statistically significant differences between mean responses (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). In this study, the researcher compared DBS responses to those of the ISHC national database. Descriptive analysis about the DBS population as a whole, allowed the researcher to identify evidence of critical factors in the areas of risk and protection (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). Any relationships with a p-value of $<.05$ were deemed significant. Data analysis included descriptive and inferential statistics.

Findings

This section describes the DBS student demographics and the findings for the four research questions. Additionally, the statistical findings will be discussed and interpreted.

Student Demographics

In the demographics portion of the survey, students indicated their age, grade level, and race/ethnicity (Table 2.2). The percentage of DBS students who were 14 or younger was greater than the national average and the percentage of students who were 18 or older was lower than

normal. These differences are attributed to the DBS survey being administered at the beginning of the school year, when students are inherently younger. There were also racial differences when comparing the data. While the DBS sample size was small, there were fewer Asian students, more African American students, and fewer White students. Notably, DBS chose to add a biracial category to the survey and therefore there is no comparable national data.

Table 2.2

Student Demographics

Question	DBS n	DBS %	National n	National %
<i>How old are you?</i>				
14 or younger	52	18.84	2976	12.03
15	66	23.91	5919	23.03
16	73	26.45	6226	25.17
17	65	23.55	2112	24.71
18 or older	20	7.25	3498	14.14
<i>What grade are you in?</i>				
9 th grade	73	26.45	6136	24.63
10 th grade	67	24.28	6402	25.74
11 th grade	72	26.09	6412	25.74
12 th grade	64	23.19	5965	23.94
<i>How would you describe yourself?</i>				
Native American or Alaskan	0	0.00	67	.27
Asian	27	9.85	3501	14.15
Black or African American	36	13.14	1715	6.93
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0.00	69	.28
Latino/Hispanic	13	4.74	1291	5.22
White	161	58.76	16037	64.80
Biracial	27	9.85	0	0.00
Other	10	3.65	2069	8.36

Student Risk Behaviors

To address the first research question, the author looked for significant differences between the DBS student and national responses pertaining to risky behaviors, including

drinking, drug use, sexual activity, and online activity. None of the questions revealed significantly lower risky behaviors for DBS students. However, consistent with the literature, DBS students confirmed engaging in maladaptive behaviors, with drinking being the most prevalent. Over 35% of students drank alcohol without parental consent in the previous 30 days (Table 2.3). This percentage is similar to a 2017 Centers for Disease Control survey that found 30% of high school students had consumed alcohol in the previous 30 days (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). However, DBS's finding is significantly higher than the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health that reported 19% of youth aged 12 to 20 consumed alcohol in the past 30 days (Health Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2018).

Table 2.3 provides an overview of the risky behavior of DBS compared to the national values.

Table 2.3

Risk Behaviors

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
During the past 30 days, on how many days did you have at least 1 drink of alcohol, without parental consent?			.2024
0 days	64.42	71.14	
1-2 days	20.97	16.11	
3-5 days	9.74	8.34	
6-10 days	4.49	2.96	
11-15 days	0.37	0.68	
16-30 days	0.00	0.78	
During the past 30 days, have you used marijuana in any form?			.0033
0 times	88.76	85.75	
1-2 times	7.49	7.44	
3-5 times	3.00	3.18	
6 or more times	0.75	3.63	
Have you ever been bullied at this school?			.0000
No	90.41	80.77	
Yes	9.59	19.23	
During the last 12 months did you ever... do unauthorized copying of another student's work?			.0016
No	84.93	77.95	
Yes	15.07	22.05	

As cited in the literature, girls may internalize their problems as opposed to externalizing them through risky behaviors (Sontag et al., 2008) which is consistent with the findings at DBS. Girls have more negative emotional reactions to interpersonal stress and prolonged exposure to interpersonal stress leads to anxiety and depression (Rudolph, 2002). The following question explores how potential adjustment problems manifest through mental health and wellness.

Student Mental Health and Wellness

In the second research question, the author examined differences between the DBS student responses and those of the national database pertaining to mental health and wellness,

including stress, anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, and disordered eating. When asked about their general health, DBS students reported significantly lower quality of health ($p=.001$) compared to the national sample (Table 2.4).

Table 2.4

General Health

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
Would you say that in general your health is...			.0114
Excellent	25.55	30.42	
Very Good	43.07	44.06	
Good	22.63	20.13	
Fair	7.66	4.56	
Poor	1.09	.82	

Most of the significant differences between the students at DBS and the national database pertained to mental health. A troubling finding is that DBS students reported contemplating suicide at higher rates with 16% of the respondents saying they had “seriously thought about it” in the last 12 months. Additionally, 40% of DBS students stated they had sought or received professional help in the past two years. These figures are significantly higher than the national responses ($p=.02$). Interestingly, DBS students reported seeing mental health professionals at higher rates; however, they were prescribed significantly lower amounts of prescription medication for anxiety and depression, despite having high rates of diagnosis with the conditions (Table 2.5).

Overall, DBS students reported less enjoyment of life, lower levels of energy, less happiness with themselves, and lower levels of general happiness. When asked to rate the phrase “I have really been enjoying life in the past 30 days”, 33% responded “mostly untrue” or “untrue”. Moreover, 36% stated they did not “like myself just the way I am” and 63% said they

were “nervous and worried a lot.” Consistent with the literature (Ghandour et al., 2004; Torsheim & Wold, 2001; Williams et al., 2018) DBS students reported higher levels of psychosomatic complaints, including 28% “feeling faint for no reason” and 67% reporting low energy levels. DBS students also felt less on top of their schoolwork compared to the national database, with 46% responding “mostly untrue” or “not true” to the phrase, “In the past 30 days, I really felt like I was on top of my schoolwork” and 63% reporting it was hard to get all of their schoolwork done.”

Table 2.5

Mental Health

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
During the past 12 months, did you ever seriously think about attempting suicide?			.0327
No	83.76	88.60	
Yes	16.24	11.40	
In the last 2 years, have you sought or received professional help (e.g. psychiatrist, psychologist, social worker, counselor, spiritual leader, nutritionist?)			.0236
No	59.93	66.74	
Yes	40.07	33.26	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I really felt like I was on top of my schoolwork			.0062
True	11.48	15.86	
Mostly true	42.22	46.46	
Mostly untrue	32.59	25.78	
Not true	13.70	11.90	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: Sometimes I feel faint for no reason			.0060
True	11.52	7.21	
Mostly true	17.10	12.98	
Mostly untrue	20.45	23.57	
Not true	50.93	56.24	

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I was happy			.0001
True	20.00	31.81	
Mostly true	57.07	49.26	
Mostly untrue	21.11	14.52	
Not true	4.81	4.41	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I really have enjoyed life			.0000
True	24.34	33.72	
Mostly true	42.32	43.99	
Mostly untrue	26.59	17.41	
Not true	6.74	4.87	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I had a lot of energy			.0000
True	3.68	8.49	
Mostly true	29.41	38.29	
Mostly untrue	49.26	37.64	
Not true	17.65	15.58	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I like myself just the way I am			.0000
True	21.64	35.11	
Mostly true	42.54	39.88	
Mostly untrue	23.13	16.85	
Not true	12.69	8.17	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: It was hard getting my work done			.0000
True	31.85	22.04	
Mostly true	31.11	31.63	
Mostly untrue	32.59	32.40	
Not true	4.44	13.93	
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I was nervous/worried a lot			.0000
True	29.89	20.93	
Mostly true	33.58	28.35	
Mostly untrue	27.31	30.02	
Not true	9.23	20.70	

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
In the past 30 days, describe how you have been feeling: I felt discouraged and sad			.0000
True	13.70	8.87	
Mostly true	27.41	21.64	
Mostly untrue	49.26	41.71	
Not true	9.63	27.78	
Are you currently taking medications that have been prescribed to you?			.0034
No	73.41	61.27	
Yes (n=71; n=3096)	26.59	38.73	
If you are taking prescribed medication, what was it prescribed for? Anxiety			.0014
No (the medication was not for anxiety)	65.71	46.50	
Yes (n=24; n=1338)	34.29	53.50	
If you are taking prescribed medication, what was it prescribed for? Depression			.0000
No (the medication was not for depression)	78.57	53.84	
Yes (n=15; n=1100)	21.43	46.16	

DBS students were concerned with their weight and body image, but not at rates that differed significantly from the national values. Similarly, the students reported sleep disturbances, but not at a significantly higher rate than the national population. However, this data is consistent with studies showing that sleep deprivation remains a problem for highly affluent youth (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009; Sarchiapone et al., 2014; Tanner, 2015).

Student Attitudes

In the third research question, the author looked for significant differences between the DBS student responses and those of the national database pertaining to student attitudes, including student perceptions of grades, motivation, and school climate. Student attitudes and perceptions are important to the problem of practice as they reveal insight into possible

adjustment problems and protective factors. For example, the most significant areas of difference between DBS and the national data pertained to motivation. DBS students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, meaning they are self-driven and inquisitive, but also motivated by the need to please others. As noted in Table 2.6, over 99% of DBS students reported needing to excel academically in order to be successful at their school, and nearly 90% place extreme or high pressure on themselves.

Table 2.6

Student Motivations/Attitudes

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
The following factors motivate me to do my schoolwork – to get a good grade			.0500
True	84.50	82.34	
Mostly true	14.02	14.63	
Mostly untrue	1.48	1.96	
Not true	0.00	1.08	
The following factors motivate me to do my schoolwork – I am interested in learning new things			.0492
True	40.00	35.76	
Mostly true	43.33	44.26	
Mostly untrue	14.07	14.88	
Not true	2.59	5.10	
The following factors motivate me to do my schoolwork – I like to do my best			.0172
True	69.14	61.23	
Mostly true	22.30	29.31	
Mostly untrue	7.06	6.68	
Not true	1.49	2.78	
The following factors motivate me to do my schoolwork – to satisfy my teachers' expectations for me			.0015
True	44.61	35.34	
Mostly true	31.97	35.60	
Mostly untrue	17.10	18.61	
Not true	6.32	10.45	

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
The following factors motivate me to do my schoolwork – to satisfy my own sense of accomplishment			.0005
True	72.12	62.81	
Mostly true	20.45	25.73	
Mostly untrue	5.20	7.76	
Not true	2.23	3.70	
For me to be successful in this school, it is important for me to excel in - Academics			.0001
No	0.74	2.90	
Yes	99.26	97.10	
How much academic pressure do you feel from – yourself			.0000
Extreme	48.51	37.85	
High	41.04	41.00	
Not Much	8.96	14.75	
None	0.75	1.98	

Protective Factors

In the final research question, the author investigated the protective factors, including relationships with peers, parents, and school staff. DBS students spent significantly less time socializing with friends outside of school, however, they reported significantly higher levels of having a friend or peer to talk to on a regular basis about what is going on in their lives. Moreover, the girls reported dating less frequently (Table 2.7). This could simply mean most of their socialization occurs at school, and they have less time for socializing in the evening. There was no evidence throughout the survey responses relating to social pressure, and the survey did not measure factors such as belonging. Overall, students felt comfortable and safe expressing their gender and sexual preferences. For the most part, peers do not appear to contribute to any stress or anxiety, as many reported having strong friendships, although there were no questions asking directly about competition among peers.

Table 2.7

Peer Relationships

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
On the last school day, in hours when you were not in class, how much time did you spent socializing with friends – by phone, computer, or in person			.0155
None	8.03	8.65	
½ hour	34.67	28.68	
1 hour	30.29	29.17	
2 hours	16.06	18.40	
3-4 hours	7.30	8.94	
5+ hours	3.65	6.15	
Do you have a friend/peer to talk to on a regular basis about what is going on in your life?			.0035
No	6.04	10.39	
Yes	93.96	89.61	
In the past year, have you dated someone on a regular basis?			.0004
No	70.52	60.48	
Yes	29.48	39.52	

While not significantly different from the national pool, DBS students reported high levels of pressure in meeting parental expectations (Table 2.8). Additionally, they reported positive and trusting relationships with their teachers and school administrators.

Table 2.8

Parental Involvement

Question	DBS %	National %	p-value
How much academic pressure do you feel from – your parents			0.1605
Extreme	48.51	37.85	
High	41.04	41.00	
Not Much	8.96	14.75	
None	0.75	1.98	
The adults who are primarily responsible for caring for me – have rules and holds me accountable			0.1897
True	61.42	63.37	
Mostly true	24.34	27.94	
Mostly untrue	11.24	6.41	
Not true	2.25	2.28	
The adults who are primarily responsible for caring for me – express interest in my life, in how things are going at school and with my friends			0.1892
True	76.67	71.75	
Mostly true	17.04	22.35	
Mostly untrue	5.19	4.12	
Not true	0.00	0.00	

Discussion

As identified in chapter one, affluent youth are increasingly an “at-risk” population (Korous et al., 2018; Lund & Dearing, 2013; Luthar, 2013; Luthar & Barkin, 2012; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar and D'Avanzo, 1999; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005; Luthar et al., 2019; Racz et al., 2011; Spencer et al., 2018). This study helped to identify specific elevated risk factors for DBS students. After analyzing the ISHC data, DBS students appear to be at low risk for external problem behaviors including substance abuse, sexual activity, bullying and cheating. While reported incidences of drinking were not significantly higher than the national ISHC database, over a third of students reported consuming alcohol in the previous 30 days. Girls are

also affected by stress in different ways from boys, including internalizing distress (Sontag et al., 2008) therefore it would make sense that students in this all female environment would deal with stress internally versus externally through outward risky behaviors.

The data revealed an area of great concern for DBS which is the mental health of its students. According to survey results, students reported significantly higher rates of suicidal ideation. They experience psychosomatic complaints, have low energy, and are frequently sad and anxious. What is especially troubling about this finding, is that the national comparison group in this study is comprised solely of students attending high achieving private schools, who already report high levels of mental health issues.

This finding is confirmed by the studies presented in the literature review. Bluth et al., (2017) found that girls reported significantly higher levels of pressure to succeed, which was positively related to higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of overall wellbeing. Low reported mental health coupled with extreme pressure to succeed is troubling and cause for concern. While parents of DBS students are highly involved in their children's lives, they can also contribute to their stress. School-related stress and parental pressure may contribute to a higher occurrence of psychosomatic complaints (Torsheim & Wold, 2001; Williams et al., 2018) Most distressing finding of the study was the above average rates of suicidal ideation. Girls experiencing chronic stress and depression are at a higher risk of suicide and suicidal ideation (Miller et al., 2017) and female adolescent suicide rates are on the rise, particularly in girls from affluent communities (Mirick et al., 2008).

Conclusion

This study investigated the risk behaviors, mental health and wellness, attitudes, and protective factors of students at DBS. Compared to the national ISHC database, the sample of

students engages in fewer risky behaviors. However, the greatest concern is the mental health and wellness of DBS students. They reported significantly lower levels of general health, higher rates of suicidal ideation, less enjoyment of life, lower levels of energy, less happiness with themselves, and lower levels of general happiness. Additionally, students reported significantly higher levels of psychosomatic complaints, and feeling nervous, worried, and discouraged. Regarding attitudes about school, DBS students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated to the point of being exceedingly concerned about their academic performance. Moreover, it appears that peers are a source of support, although it is unknown the extent to which they are competition. Finally, the girls feel that their parents are involved in their lives, but also are a source of pressure.

This chapter took the larger problem of female affluent youth being at an increased risk of maladaptive behaviors and mental health concerns and identified which behaviors and concerns were of significance at an elite private all-girl school in the Mid-Atlantic. Quantitative data were collected approximately three months before COVID-19 arrived in the United States, and five months before the school moved to remote learning for the remainder of the school year. The data in this chapter suggested concerning levels of mental wellbeing pre-pandemic. Once the 2020 pandemic ensued, and disrupted the college application cycle, it was important to understand how both the college application process and mental health of students were impacted by COVID-19. The next chapter describes an exploratory research design to better understand the mental health of a group of seniors at DBS as they underwent the college admission process in the midst of a global pandemic and quarantine.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

In Chapter 2, a quantitative descriptive study of the risk behaviors, mental health and wellness, attitudes, and protective factors of students at DBS revealed significant maladaptive behaviors. Specifically, students reported mental health concerns including lower levels of general health, higher rates of suicidal ideation. They also reported less enjoyment of life, lower levels of energy, less happiness with themselves, and lower levels of general happiness. Notably, these data were collected prior to the 2020 global pandemic. Preliminary data on wellness during COVID-19 (described below) suggests that mental health concerns may have worsened.

Adolescents are a particularly vulnerable group during times of uncertainty and unrest, and the sudden change in routine, home confinement, virtual learning, and stress in the home may have long term health consequences (Guessoum et al., 2020). Researchers have found that the 2020 pandemic contributed to adolescents post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with girls estimated to be twice as likely to suffer from PTSD as their male counterparts (Guessoum et al., 2020). Moreover, Ellis, Dumas, and Forbes (2020) suggest that consequences of the pandemic may contribute to greater harm to students with preexisting mental health conditions.

The researcher and DBS did not collect any data between March and June of the 2019-2020 school year – a time when schooling was virtual due to uncertainties and risks associated with the pandemic. However, there were a few early studies about the wellness of adolescents during this period. Dr. Luthar (the author of this study's conceptual framework) published a white paper in July 2020 on student resilience during COVID-19. Between April and June, she collected data from 15,331 students in 6th through 12th grade, attending both public and private institutions across the U.S. (Luthar et al., in preparation). Preliminary analysis revealed clinically significant signs of depression and anxiety, with highest rates (6.2% and 7.5%

consecutively) reported by 11th grade females. When examining protective factors, this subgroup also reported the lowest parent relationship quality, with 18.5% citing feelings of high stress and low support in their parental relationships during the beginning months of quarantine. Additionally, students reported high levels of unstructured time, high levels of distractions, and low learning efficacy. However, data also revealed that many students appreciated support and understanding from adults at school.

In a study of risk and protective factors for prospective changes in adolescent mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic, Magson et al. (2020) studied 248 teenagers at two different points in time. The researchers collected survey data on mental health 12 months prior to the pandemic and again two months after the widespread outbreak of COVID across the U.S. When comparing the two datasets, mental health deteriorated intra-pandemic, especially in girls and those who reported higher levels of anxiety and depression pre-pandemic. Most commonly reported concerns included less contact with friends, more conflict with parents, and trouble with virtual learning. Furthermore, youth in this study were not concerned about contracting the virus, rather their distress stemmed from the isolation and restrictions of the pandemic.

Researchers at Texas A&M University conducted an online survey with their undergraduate students during the pandemic to assess the mental wellness of their students. The university closed its campus on March 23, 2020 and the survey was launched on May 4, 2020. Of the 2,031 respondents, almost half of the students reported moderate-to-severe levels of depression, more than a third reported moderate-to-severe levels of anxiety, and 18.04% reported suicidal ideation. Additionally, just under half said they were “unable to cope with stress related to the current situation” (Wang et al., 2020, p.7).

Top academic concerns included difficulty concentrating, fear or worry about academic progress and future plans, fear and worry about academic performance, difficulty adapting to distance learning, and increased class workload. Primary health-related concerns included fear and worry about personal health and those of loved ones, changes in sleeping habits, changes in eating patterns, depressive thoughts, worsening of chronic health problems, and suicidal thoughts. Finally, the most frequently reported lifestyle-related concerns were social isolation, physical distancing, limited access to services, fear about financial situation, worry induced by the media, changes in living environment, limited access to medical care, and limited access to counseling services.

Early data related to student wellbeing during COVID-19 suggests that the pandemic increased mental health concerns. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, students at DBS experienced significant mental health challenges. The stress and anxiety that these students report is exacerbated by the college admission process. Chapters 3 and 4 set out to understand this critical process and the experiences of students during COVID-19, in order to learn what supports and resources are working, and how the college admission process may have changed in response to the pandemic.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the effects of COVID-19 on the wellbeing of affluent girls applying to college. The goals include highlighting the roles, supports, and resources available to students from parents, advisors, peers, along with documenting any pandemic related changes to the admission process. Additionally, knowledge gleaned from this research may inform recommendations on how young women can best navigate the college process in future admission cycles and how educators can best support them

during these moments. The research questions address potential changes to the admission process and how COVID-19 affected the students' protective factors while going through the college admission process.

RQ1: In what ways did the pandemic change students' college admission process?

RQ2: What was the role of parents in the admissions process during a pandemic?

RQ3: How do students' peers contribute to the college admission process during the pandemic?

RQ4: In what ways did advisors participate in the college admissions process and how did they support student during a pandemic?

RQ5: In what ways did the pandemic contribute to students' wellbeing?

Methods

The following section describes the research design of the study, the participants, and sample selection.

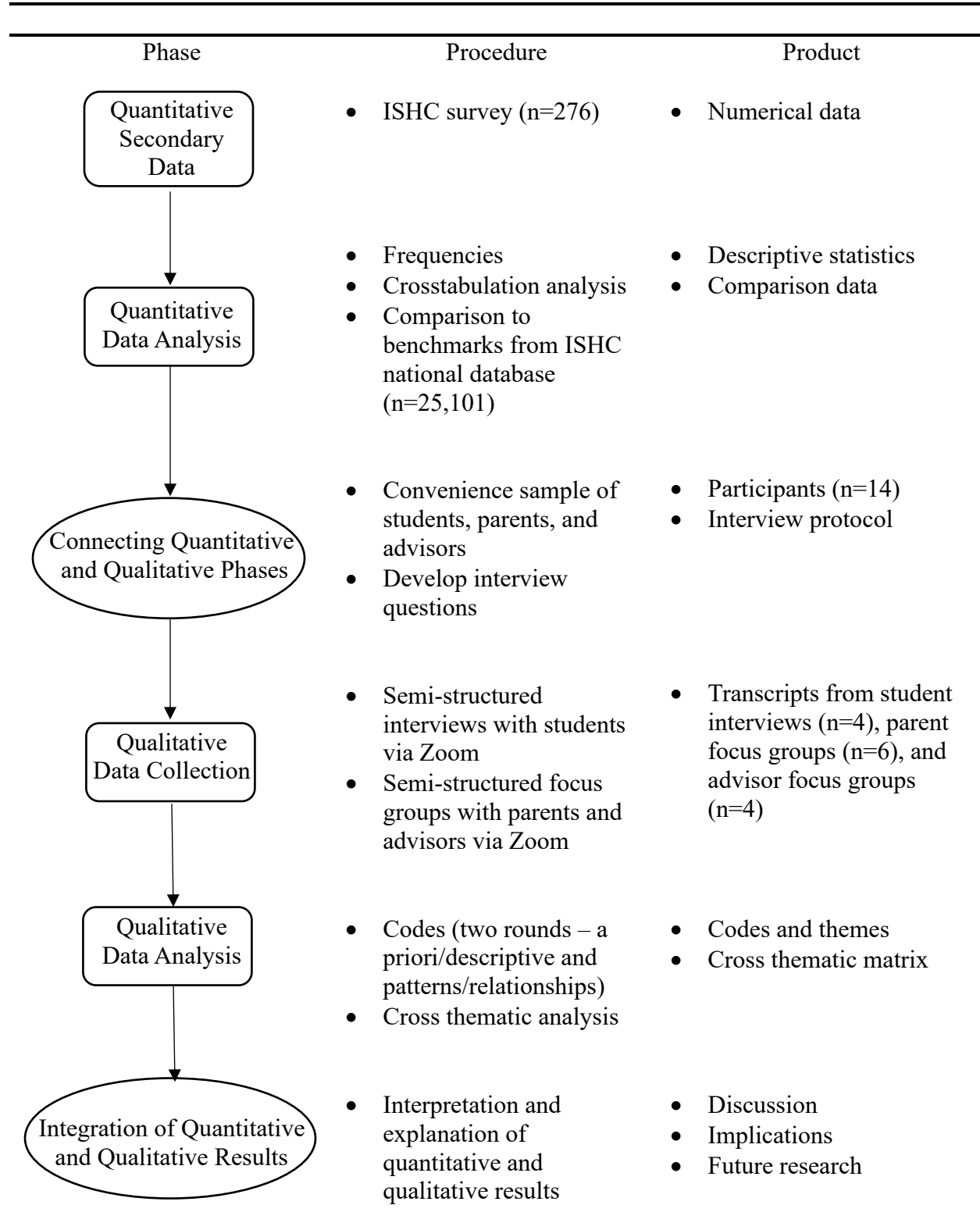
Research Design

The study utilized a multi-method design (Figure 3.1), with quantitative data for the needs assessment in Chapter 2, and qualitative data for the exploratory study in Chapter 3. Onwuegbuzie and Leech (2006) suggest that the scope and purpose of the study, and goals of the researcher should guide the selection of an appropriate research design. Used together, the researcher can take advantage of the complementary strengths of both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell & Clark, 2007)

The multi-method design is most suitable for this study as the initial quantitative data collection and analysis were conducted pre-pandemic. After the pandemic ensued, there was a

need to collect a qualitative dataset to explore the impact of COVID-19 on the subject group. For clarification, this is not intended to be a pre-pandemic/post-pandemic study. Rather, it included secondary data that described baseline outcomes related to female adolescent well-being and maladaptive behaviors. The researcher then collected primary data to help explain any differences in wellbeing and changes in the admission process that may be attributed to the pandemic. Furthermore, the researcher hopes to uncover how the students navigated changes to the college admission process caused by the pandemic. Figure 3.1 outlines each phase, procedure, and product of the multi-method design for this study.

Figure 3.1 Multi-Method Design Procedures



Participants

At the time of the study, the students were enrolled in Grade 12 at DBS. In addition, all parents in the study had a child enrolled in Grade 12 at DBS, and all advisors worked directly with the population. A greater discussion of participants is provided in Chapter 4. All participants signed the necessary consent forms in compliance with Institutional Review Board.

Sample Selection

The researcher used convenience sampling, a simple process of recruiting individuals who are easily accessible at the research site (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). For the students, (and with permission from the school) they accessed DBS's online student database and retrieved a list of students in the 12th grade, along with their contact information and date of birth. To simplify the recruitment and IRB process, the author excluded anyone under the age of 18, resulting in a list of 24 out of 78 eligible students. The researcher emailed the 24 eligible students (Appendix B) and accepted the first four students to respond to the invitation into the study. Next, the researcher contacted all parents with a child enrolled in the 12th grade (Appendix B) and asked for their participation, with four positively responding. Finally, she contacted the faculty and staff advisors for the 12th grade class (Appendix B) and 6 of the 8 agreed to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Qualitative data collection included individual interviews with students and focus groups with parents and advisors. Each student participated in a 30-minute interview over Zoom with the researcher at a time most suitable for the student. Individual interviews were chosen instead of a focus group since each student has a unique college admission process that often contains sensitive details such as names of colleges and academic information. All interviews took place

in November and December of the students' senior year. Therefore, they had submitted their college applications but in many instances were still waiting for an admission decision.

Advisors and parents each had their own separate focus group with unique questions. The focus groups took place over Zoom and lasted approximately 30 minutes. Focus groups were chosen for the advisors and parents to learn more aggregate information about the senior class and to triangulate information provided by the students. All participants signed IRB research informed consent form (Appendix C). The audio of all interviews was recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai on a password protected device. Transcripts of the interviews were then uploaded into NVivo for coding and analysis.

The interview protocol relied on a semi-structured design using Turner's (2010) general interview guide approach. In this approach, the interview questions were prepared in advance, however, the interviewer had the flexibility to amend and ask follow-up questions. This structure is useful for probing interviewees for additional information and permits the researcher to restructure questions based on previous responses. The researcher is in control over the interview and drives the questions in directions they best see fit. The researcher prepared questions in advance of the interviews (Appendix D). The nature of the questions related to the research questions for the qualitative portion of the study. For example, students were asked about their college search process before and during the pandemic including involvement of their parents, peers, and adults at school. Similarly, parents and advisors were asked about their involvement in the college process as well as what they observed in their child/student before and during the pandemic.

Plan for Data Analysis

The author relied on an emergent research design to the qualitative analysis, which allows the researcher to be flexible, and open to making discoveries (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). They also created a series of a priori codes based upon the research questions. Lochmiller and Lester (2017) encourage the use of a priori coding, or predetermined codes, when relating or addressing a research question. The interview and focus group transcripts were uploaded into NVivo for coding and analysis. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) recommend cycles of coding qualitative data. The first round included descriptive coding and the second round looked for patterns, themes, and relationships (see Chapter 4 for detailed description). Table 3.1 outlines the research questions, data sources, timeline for collection, and data analysis.

Table 3.1

Data Collection Matrix

Research Question	Data Source(s)	Timeline	Data Analysis
RQ1: In what ways did the pandemic change students' college admission process?	Student interviews, Parent and advisor focus groups	December 2020	A priori coding, descriptive coding, categories/themes
RQ2: What was the role of parents in the admissions process during a pandemic?	Student interviews, Parent and advisor focus groups	December 2020	A priori coding, descriptive coding, categories/themes
RQ3: How do students' peers contribute to the college admission process during the pandemic?	Student interviews, Parent and advisor focus groups	December 2020	A priori coding, descriptive coding, categories/themes
RQ4: In what ways did advisors participate in the college admissions process and how did they support student during a pandemic?	Student interviews, Advisor focus groups	December 2020	A priori coding, descriptive coding, categories/themes
RQ5: In what ways did the pandemic contribute to students' wellbeing?	Student interviews, Parent and advisor focus groups	December 2020	A priori coding, descriptive coding, categories/themes

Validity Threats and Mitigation

As previously referenced in the research design portion of this chapter, multi-methods research is an optimal methodology for solving real world problems as it combines the strengths and mitigates the weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative research individually (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). However, it is still important to address the threats to validity and mitigation

steps of the qualitative strand of data, particularly in a multi-methods study where the quantitative and qualitative data sets are collected separately (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Krefting (1991) interpreted Guba's (1981) four elements of trustworthiness (truth value, applicability, consistency, and neutrality) and compared criteria by research approach (Table 3.2)

Table 3.2

Comparison of Criteria by Research Approach

Criterion	Qualitative Approach	Quantitative Approach
Truth Value	Credibility	Internal validity
Applicability	Transferability	External validity
Consistency	Dependability	Reliability
Neutrality	Confirmability	Objectivity

Krefting (1991) continues her conversation with a summary of strategies with which to establish trustworthiness in qualitative data. For this study, the author mitigates threats to trustworthiness through the strategies outlined in Table 3.3.

Table 3.3

Validity Threats & Mitigation

Trustworthiness Threat	Mitigation	Description
Credibility	Establishing authority of researcher	Director of College Guidance
	Triangulation	Collected data and observations of the students from multiple sources (advisors and parents)
Transferability	Rich Description	Detailed and robust description of study participants and the research setting/context
Dependability	Peer Debriefing	Frequent consultation with committee members to discuss data collection and analysis
	Triangulation	Collected data and observations of the students from multiple sources (advisors and parents)
Confirmability	Researcher Reflexivity	Acknowledgment and disclosure of researcher bias

The next chapter provides additional information and a study specific description of the threats to mitigation and research limitations.

Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of research design, data collection, and data analysis to examine the wellbeing of girls going through the competitive college admission process at a high achieving school (DBS) amidst COVID-19. Additionally, the study investigated how the

college admission process changed due to the global pandemic. The subsequent chapter describes the findings of the study and a discussion of future implications.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to examine the well-being of affluent girls applying to college during a global pandemic. Moreover, it sought to uncover potential pandemic-related procedural changes in college admissions by conducting an in-depth analysis of students undergoing the process in real time. This chapter presents the findings from individual student interviews and parent and advisor focus groups as well implications for what emerged. Subsequent sections include an explanation of the coding process and theme development, description of the key findings including a comparison with the quantitative findings from Chapter 2. Finally, the chapter concludes research implications, recommendations, and limitations of the study.

This chapter addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways did the pandemic change students' college admission process?

RQ2: What was the role of parents in the admissions process during a pandemic?

RQ3: How do students' peers contribute to the college admission process during the pandemic?

RQ4: In what ways did advisors participate in the college admissions process, and how did they support students during a pandemic?

RQ5: In what ways did the pandemic contribute to students' wellbeing?

Participants

Qualitative data included four individual student interviews, a focus group with four parents, and a focus group with six advisors. Table 4.1 names (pseudonyms) and describes the participants in the study. Participants were permitted to choose their own pseudonyms.

Definitions of relevant information in Table 4.1 are provided throughout the findings and discussion.

Table 4.1

Study Participants, Demographics, and Relevant Information

Name	Participant Type	Demographics and Relevant Information
Amanda	Student	Asian-American, applied ED and was admitted, had completed standardized testing, did not visit colleges pre-pandemic. Will be attending a college she had not visited.
Julia	Student	African-American and White, applied ED and was admitted, had completed standardized testing, had visited colleges pre-pandemic
Nicole	Student	Hispanic, did not apply ED (but applied REA and was not admitted to that college), no standardized testing pre-pandemic, had visited some colleges pre-pandemic
Sarah	Student	White, did not apply ED, no standardized testing pre-pandemic, had visited some colleges pre-pandemic
Brianne	Parent	African-American and White, mother of Julia - applied ED and was admitted, had completed standardized testing, had visited colleges pre-pandemic
Karen	Parent	White, did not apply ED (but applied REA and was not admitted), completed standardized testing pre-pandemic, had visited some colleges pre-pandemic (daughter was underage and did not participate in an interview).
Lisa	Parent	White, teacher at DBS and also the mother of a 12 th grader attending the school. Child applied ED and was admitted, had no standardized testing pre-pandemic, had visited some colleges pre-pandemic. Will be attending a college she had not visited (daughter was underage and did not participate in an interview).
Steve	Parent	Asian-American, married to Lisa.
Ben	Advisor	White, male, math teacher and advisor. Years of experience = 10; years at DBS = 4

Name	Participant Type	Demographics and Relevant Information
Blaire	Advisor	African-American, female, learning specialist, advisor. Years of experience = 12; years at DBS = 5
Clarice	Advisor	White, female, biology teacher, upper school assistant dean, advisor. Years of experience = 20; years at DBS = 20
Ellen	Advisor	White, female, religion teacher, upper school Chaplain, advisor. Years of experience = 19; years at DBS = 10
Jenna	Advisor	White, female, Spanish teacher, grade 12 dean and advisor, Years of experience = 18; years at DBS = 9
Marie	Advisor	Hispanic, female, upper school counselor, health and wellness teacher, and advisor. Years of experience = 19; years at DBS = 15

To aid in understanding the findings, a student may only apply to one college Early Decision (ED). By doing so, students agree to withdraw all other applications and enroll at that college if accepted. This binding admission application has an early deadline (typically November 1), and students are notified of the decision by mid-December. For students not admitted ED, they may opt to submit a second-round ED application to another school – referred to as ED2, as well as regular decision applications in January. Not all colleges offer ED or ED2, and some have an early admission program called Restricted Early Action (REA). REA acts like an ED application in that a student may only apply REA to one school (and no ED schools); however, they are not obligated to attend if admitted (National Association of College Admission Counseling, 2019). Standardized testing refers to the SAT and ACT college entrance exams.

Qualitative Analysis

As described in Chapter 3, the study employed qualitative methods with a mix of a priori and emergent codes. The author relied on the study research questions to create a list of a priori codes (Table 4.2).

Table 4.2

Translating Research Questions into A Priori Codes

Research Question	A Priori Codes
RQ1: In what ways did the pandemic change students' college admission process?	College Process
RQ2: What was the role of parents in the admissions process during a pandemic?	Role/support of parents
RQ3: How do students' peers contribute to the college admission process during the pandemic?	Role/support of peers
RQ4: In what ways did advisors participate in the college admissions process, and how did they support students during a pandemic?	Role/support of advisors
RQ5: In what ways did the pandemic contribute to students' wellbeing?	Student wellbeing

Next, the researcher reviewed the data three times using the a priori codes using Nvivo and once by hand. As a result of this iterative process, emergent codes were identified through a descriptive coding process, which summarizes responses into one or two words (Lochmiller & Lester, 2017). For example, the researcher coded the statement, "I was able to have like a lot of my APs and stuff like that done early. And all my SAT subject tests I was able to get them done that summer after sophomore year as well" as "testing." After establishing a list of descriptive codes, she looked for patterns within the coding and commonalities among people during the second cycle of coding. Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) state that patterns typically consist of categories/themes, causes/explanations, relationships among people, and theoretical constructs. Using Nvivo, the researcher was able to see where codes appeared across student interviews, advisor focus groups, and parent focus groups. For example, the code "college visit" appeared throughout the transcripts. Aggregating statements by this code allowed the researcher

to analyze perspectives on college visits both between students and among the parents and advisors. From the final list of codes, the author developed themes as depicted in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Final list of codes and themes

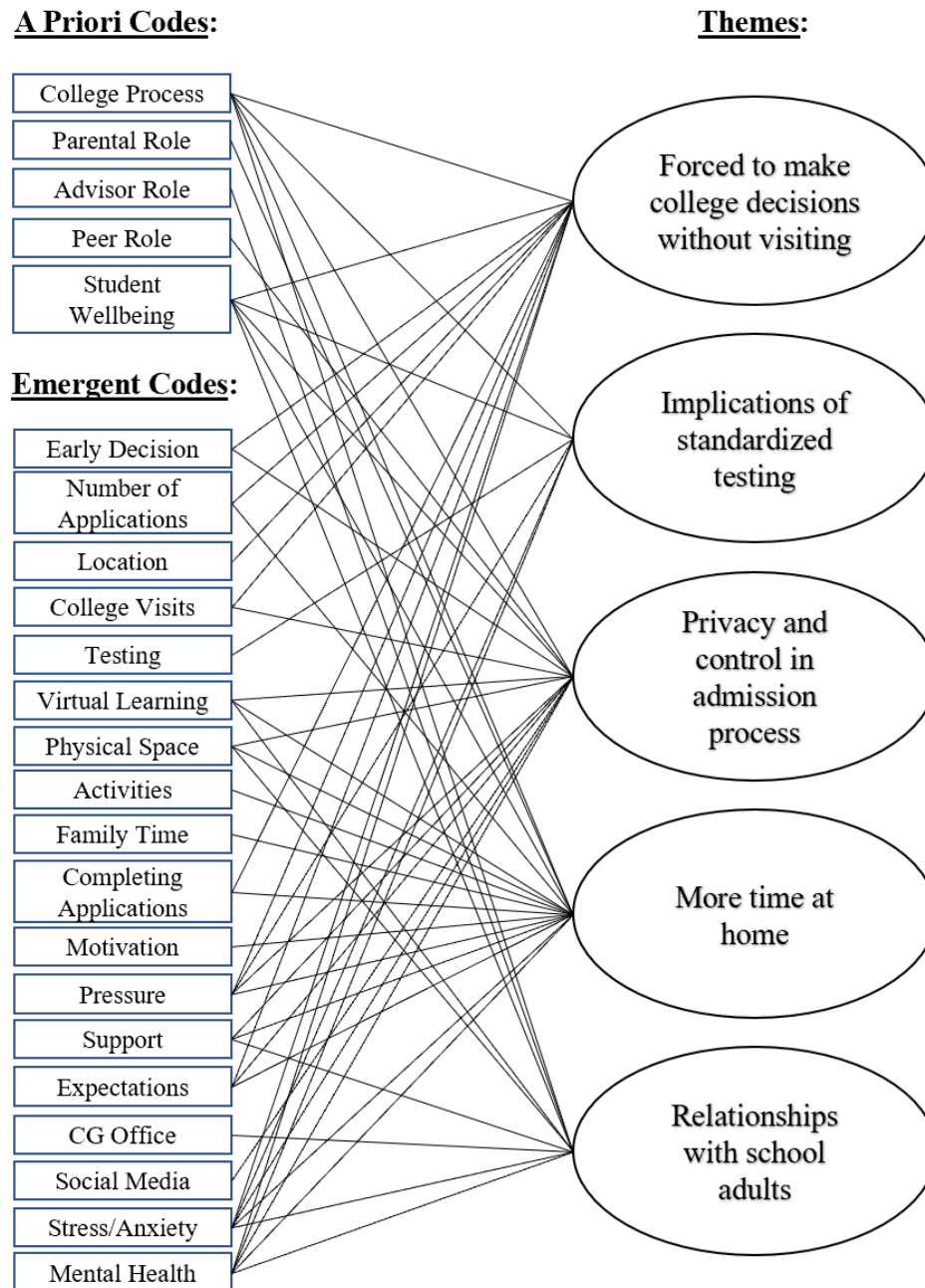


Figure 4.1. Depiction of the relationship among final codes and themes developed

Qualitative Findings

Through an iterative coding process and review of the final list of codes, five themes emerged. The themes included: forced to make college decisions without visiting, implications of

standardized testing, privacy and control in the admission process, more time at home, and relationships with school adults. Table 4.3 offers a high-level summary of the participants' description of their college admissions process during the 2020 global pandemic.

Table 4.3

Summary of Information and Findings by Student

Theme	Amanda	Julia	Nicole	Sarah	Karen's Daughter	Lisa/Steve's Daughter
Decision without visiting (Early Decision)	+(ED admit)	+(ED admit)	-(REA (non-admit))	*(No ED or REA)	-(REA (non-admit))	+/-ED (admit)
Standardized Testing (pre-pandemic)	+(Completed)	+(Completed)	-(No testing)	-(No testing)	+(Completed)	-(No testing)
Privacy and control in admission process	+	+	+	+/-	+	+
More time at home	+	+	+	+	+	+
Relationships with school adults	+/-	*	-	-	*	*

+ = positive experience

- = negative experience

+/- = mixed experience

* = unable to determine

ED = Early Decision

REA = Restricted Early Action

Notably, pandemic related uses of technology permeated throughout all of the themes and are discussed in the findings. The subsequent section details the findings by theme and offers

participant descriptions of their lived experiences along with related extant literature to situate the findings.

College Process

The first two themes – forced to make college decisions without visiting and changes in standardized testing, represent pandemic-related changes in the college admission process. With the interviews occurring in the middle of the admission cycle, the researcher was able to capture both procedural changes and how families responded to the changes in real time.

Forced to make college decisions without visiting. Throughout the pandemic, college campuses were closed for visitors and therefore, high school students were unable to see colleges in person before making critical decisions about where to apply (college list), and whether to apply to a college under a binding Early Decision (ED) program. The subsequent conversation describes the theme and details findings related to students having to make decisions about college before visiting.

Visiting a college in person offers students opportunities to explore the campus as well as meet with admission staff, faculty, and current students. Not only does visiting provide additional information that may not be available online, for many students, but it also provides a sense or feeling about the college. All the families in the study were affected by the inability to see colleges and universities in person but whether the impact was positive or negative varied by individual circumstances. Student, Sarah described,

I think the main thing for me is I didn't really get to visit the colleges that were on my list, and I think that would have been really helpful, especially spring of junior year when narrowing down the colleges that I was interested in, because I found that although the

Zoom tours and online things could be helpful, it was hard to really get a sense of the college unless you're actually there.

Similarly, one of the mothers, Lisa, commented,

Okay, that's the biggest stressor. I mean, when the pandemic hit, my first reaction was, oh my gosh, we won't be able to do any trips in the next couple of months. By the time we got to the summer, we'd sort of become inured to the fact that we were going to be hunkering down for a little bit. So initially, it was like okay we're putting this off, and then reality hit in that we won't be visiting all.

Other families were somewhere in the middle, having visited a few colleges prior to the pandemic, but still wanting to see other schools on their list. For example, Nicole said, “Luckily, I had been able to visit some campuses in person...we had gone up to Boston which was good, but, there were still a few places that I was hoping to go and that wasn’t possible.” She also described how many schools looked good on paper, but it was hard to get a sense of the people, which to Nicole, was an important element in her search. A parent, Karen, also commented that while they had seen colleges during family vacations, there were many visits they had planned during a two-week spring break trip that was cancelled due to COVID-19.

One student, Amanda, highlighted the positive side of not being able to visit campuses and instead utilizing virtual tours. She noted, “There's been online virtual tours and informational sessions like I think it's almost increased access for me like I'm able to learn information about schools I probably wouldn't have visited otherwise.” Therefore, while all families were impacted by the inability to visit campuses physically, the individual effect varied. Consequently, the college list, or the list of schools where students chose to apply, was also affected both in terms of where they applied and the number of colleges on their list.

College list. Most students use college visits to build their college list. The college list refers to a fluid list of colleges that each student is researching and considering applying. Typically, a college list is fluid as students may add or eliminate colleges based on evolving interests and priorities. Two sub-topics evolved from the college list: the size of list and location of schools.

When the students were asked about how the pandemic impacted their college search, two of the four students (Sarah and Nicole) mentioned applying to more colleges than they would otherwise. According to Sarah,

I probably applied to more just because with the pandemic (as), everything just felt a little more uncertain. So, I wanted to be more safe than sorry. Um, yeah, I think after the pandemic (started) my parents, were also feeling like I should be more safe than sorry, and so they were kind of encouraging me to apply to a few more schools. So, I think they were a little bit more involved in, like how many schools I'll be applying to.

Similarly, Nicole commented, "I think it expanded my list because then I ended up like applying to more because I wasn't able to visit and didn't know how I'd feel about each one." With all of the uncertainties accompanying the pandemic, both students expressed comfort or peace of mind in applying to additional schools.

Another sub-topic that emerged from both students and parents was the location of schools students were considering during the pandemic. While staying close to home remained a consideration, ultimately, it appeared to have little impact on the schools students added to their final list. Sarah commented, "I still applied to international schools, but I think at one point in the process, I was a little bit hesitant about that because of the pandemic. However, overall, I don't think it really affected that." Nicole made a similar comment, "Yeah, I mean I think I did

consider location at times, but at the end of the day, I already kind of planned on staying sort of within a certain region which was relatively big, and I don't think that really changed with the pandemic.”

Several parents also weighed in on the location of the colleges their daughters were considering and conversations they were having as a family. Steve said,

You know I think part of the reason that she decided to go to the University of Chicago sight unseen is she wanted to strike out on her own geographically a little bit. All the places we saw were up and down the East Coast. I did hear about people wanting to go to college closer to home. But I think strangely enough, this pandemic liberated her for a little bit to think about other options.

Karen also noted, “We had discussions around do you want to be closer to home because of this, or should we be concerned, there's increased crime in some areas. But, hopefully, it's not going to last forever, so we dismissed it, and ultimately, I don't think it impacted her list.” Brianne added, “Everything she was looking at were small enough (colleges) that I had a feeling they would go back in person, so yeah, it wasn't much of a thing.” In summary, while multiple students reported applying to more colleges due to uncertainty, the pandemic appeared to have little impact on the geographic location of the colleges on their lists.

Early Decision. The decision to apply to a college Early Decision (ED) came up in all the interviews and focus groups. The ED round has several benefits for applicants, including higher admission rates, learning of the decision early in the cycle, and if admitted – being finished with the process without having to submit multiple regular decision applications.

However, some students are reluctant to apply ED as they may not have a favorite school, may

want to hear admission decisions from multiple schools, have choices, and can compare financial aid packages (although, financial aid was not a concern for families in this study).

Some DBS students felt like they were not prepared to submit an ED application because they could not visit the schools. According to Nicole (who applied REA and was not admitted),

I don't know if I would have done an early decision (without the pandemic) like I probably still wouldn't have. I think like, just having that in the back of my mind like that there were some schools that I hadn't been able to see like in person. Even if I could still go online and like find out information, I think that was something that was sort of preventing me from committing to a certain school as quickly. Because, again, like I hadn't seen all the options. I think that was probably one of the most stressful parts for me. Just like I didn't want to make that decision prematurely.

Karen's daughter (who also applied REA and was not admitted) was also uneasy about applying ED because of her inability to visit all of her options beforehand,

She hoped to hone in on her list and by fall of senior year, and do a second visit if possible, in order to help her come up with an early decision. But as a result, that didn't happen and she found at even with all of the virtual tours and talking to DBS alums and current students that she still didn't have a good sense for a lot of the campuses and she did not feel comfortable doing an early decision so she did not. So that was, you know, a pretty big impact for her we'll see ultimately how it turns out.

Alternatively, for Julia, not being able to visit more schools helped her settle on an ED choice, as she commented,

It (the pandemic) definitely sped up my process, and I probably would have waited and visited a couple more schools. I kept thinking, what if there's tons of schools out there

that I'm just missing visiting? Somehow the pandemic made it so I kind of had the schools in front of me some I was very excited about. And I kind of felt like I would end up at any of these schools and be totally happy, so it ended up actually like limiting my stress, because I only have like a couple options.

Julia's mother, Brianne, echoed her daughter's sentiment about how it narrowed her focus and eventual decision to apply to a school ED, stating, "I don't think it would have gone that way if COVID didn't happen. I think her father and I would have pushed to have more visits. Now that it's happening, I think it's the best fit ever, and I'm so thrilled for her. But it would have probably been more complicated."

Additionally, two students in the study applied ED to a college without visiting it first. Amanda said,

I applied ED to Northwestern without visiting but wasn't bothered by it since it's the number one journalism school in the country. Everyone knows it's cold right like I already know it's going to be some sort of adjustment. I guess all the benefits and just like the amazing programs and people that Northwestern has outweighs it.

Lisa and Steve's daughter also applied to a college ED without visiting it beforehand. Lisa said, "I mean, I've never even been there." Steve added, "By the time the pandemic hit our daughter was up to 10 institutions visited, yet she ended up applying Early Decision successfully to a place that's sight unseen for her." For both students, the college's reputation and lure of higher ED admission rates was enough to push them toward the decision.

In sum, the pandemic forced students to make decisions about their college list and ED choice with incomplete information since they were unable to visit the universities beforehand. For some, limiting their options forced them (in a good way) to focus on the choices in front of

them. The struggles presented by Nicole, Karen's daughter, and Julia, all represent a surplus of choice. Schwartz (2005) sites this as a frequent problem for affluent families. Since they have abundant resources and endless options, it can be hard making a decision as they always wonder if there is something better out there. Albeit good or bad, the pandemic and subsequent closing of visits limited options for a group that otherwise has abundant choices in post-secondary enrollment.

Others were willing to submit an ED application sight unseen because the benefits outweighed the risks in their minds. According to the DBS college guidance office, even in a "normal" year, DBS students feel compelled to submit an early application as they are enticed by higher admission rates and surrounded by the pressure of seeing their peers applying early. The pandemic compounded the stress of making that decision as they had to do so with limited information. Two of the students in this study felt uncomfortable applying ED because they felt ill-informed to make an educated decision. Coincidentally, one of the two students (Nicole) applied to a college ED2 (a second round of ED) after being denied from her non-binding, Early Action school. She told the College Guidance Office that she was feeling anxious and pressured by the process and thought that ED2 would give her the best chance of getting into a "good" college. Alternatively, two students in the study applied ED to colleges sight unseen, which according to the College Guidance Office would have been incredibly rare under normal circumstances. At first glance it may seem surprising that students were willing to attend a college sight unseen, but with declining admission rates, particularly for affluent students in the Northeast (Mehaffey, 2020), the slightly better chance of admission by applying ED, and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic, students were willing to take that chance if it increased their chances of being admitted to a prestigious school.

Implications of Standardized Testing

The topic of standardized testing was a prominent theme throughout the interviews. A necessary frame of reference is that the pandemic hit in March of their junior year, and many students had yet to sit for an ACT or SAT administration. During the pandemic, most testing sites canceled the exam throughout the spring and summer months. As a result, almost all colleges in the United States went test-optional – eliminating testing as a requirement for admission.

Steve provided a vivid description of having lunch with his daughter when they received word that her April SAT was canceled. “Frustration, it doesn't begin to describe it,” Steve said. “We teach them for years and years to thrive on planning steps ahead, and all of a sudden, I'm not taking my SAT. What do I do now?” His wife Lisa added, “I think the most impactful element was when the heck are we going to take those standardized tests that was like the biggest part for us.” Sarah also had her test canceled in April, commenting,

It kept getting delayed and canceled, so I ended up only having one opportunity to take it when it was offered at DBS in the fall – which was a lot later than I thought I was going to be testing. So yeah, that was a little bit stressful. And even though colleges were test optional, I still felt a little pressure for me to get that test score done.

Nicole also felt the need to have a test score despite colleges going test optional, and even drove over 1,000 miles to take the exam. “Yeah, I definitely think testing was one of the biggest things for me. I started looking like a lot further, like where could I drive. I ended up looking at North Carolina, and eventually, I ended up driving all the way down to Florida.” When asked a follow-up question about why she felt she needed a test score when it was optional, she stated,

I feel like DBS has such a high standard. And also, like, even though I know the test scores are just one element, I feel like having a good test score can really give you that advantage. When you're thinking of applying to college, even though now they're like, oh, you can still get by without test scores, there's still kind of an idea in your mind of okay, in order to have my application the test score is part of it. I feel like when I thought about the college process, I thought about SAT's and ACT's. And so maybe that was just like in the back of my mind and something that I felt I needed.

Other students who had completed standardized testing before the pandemic expressed a great sense of relief and empathy for their classmates who were still trying to test. Amanda said, “Luckily, I already took my ACT, and I think that's made me realize like how privileged I am in this situation in the pandemic. A lot of my friends like lost testing opportunities and were stressing about taking the SAT or ACT.” Julia, who was also done with testing, commented, “That was the piece of the process that was different from my friends as they were really overwhelmed with testing, and I kind of felt like, oh, I'm not as overwhelmed in this process.” This sense of relief was confirmed by a parent Karen, who said, “I could see how that would totally be a huge stressor, and I know that my daughter felt so very very fortunate that she had taken her tests in February because that was one uncertainty that she was able to take out of the equation.”

While testing is a normal stressor in the college process (von der Embse & Witmer, 2014), students who had completed their standardized testing pre-pandemic experienced a tremendous sense of relief. The students who had yet to test faced multiple test cancellations and immense anxiety. Despite almost all colleges waiving test scores for its applicants due to the inability to take the exam, DBS students in the study insisted that they still needed to have

scores. One student, Nicole, traveled over 1,000 miles to Florida to take the exam. When asked why she did not just apply without test scores, she explained, “I feel like DBS has like such a high standard. And also, like even though I know the test scores are just one element I feel like having a good test score can really give you that advantage.” For these young women, test-optional did not mean optional as they have been hearing their entire academic lives that nothing is optional – creating an engrained sense of internal pressure. Moreover, high achievement becomes a part of their identity (Låftman et al., 2013) This one student’s story, is an exemplar of the stress that permeates the culture of high achieving schools (Pekrun et al., 2019) and the unrelenting pressure that affluent girls feel to be the best (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009; Luthar & Becker, 2002; Luthar et al., 2019).

As demonstrated in the findings, the cancelation of standardized testing had a negative effect on the wellbeing of students who had not taken the exam prior to the pandemic. While the change in standardized testing limited a students’ control over their applications, the following theme discusses how the girls gained agency in the process while in quarantine.

Privacy and Control in the Admission Process

As presented in the conceptual framework and literature review, peers in high achieving contexts can be a source of support (protective factor) and/or a source of competition. Referring to the quantitative data in Chapter 2, DBS students reported significantly higher levels of having a friend or peer to talk to on a regular basis about what is going on in their lives (compared to similar independent, high achieving schools). To evaluate the contribution of the peer support system while applying to college, students were asked, “Did your peers and friends influence your college admission process? If so, how?” With the follow-up questions, “What about after the pandemic began? Did their influence change?” Throughout the findings, some students

relied upon their close friendships for support, while others benefited from varying degrees of distance from their peers.

For student Amanda (who was accepted to her ED school), her close friends were a source of support throughout the process:

I basically forced my friends to hang out and talk about college with me. We'd commiserate like, oh my god, like this is really hard. I would have my friends look over my personal statements for me, stuff like that. And more importantly, one of my favorite things that I did when I was opening all my decisions, I had a Zoom and I had like all my friends join in. Obviously, it turned out really well like they were screaming, but I knew that even if I didn't get in, I would have that support system. The way I deal with (things) is by being around people and talking about it with other people.

When asked in a follow-up question if she felt any competition among her friends, Amanda explained,

I think if you're like, 18, I know it's easy to be jealous or it's hard to be happy for other people when you're not doing so well. But the reason I'm good friends with them is because they genuinely support me, and they want good things for me. Plus, we were all looking at different majors and schools. I just feel like getting into college, especially like all these top-tier colleges, it's like winning the lottery, you know, so that's why I don't understand when people are embarrassed, they don't get in.

On the other hand, Julia, who also applied and was accepted ED, described a damaging scene that happened at school early in her junior year (pre-pandemic):

I don't really care what anyone else thinks, but it can get uncomfortable like sitting at a (cafeteria) table because everyone is always talking about college. I remember like right

after I finished touring Tulane, and I didn't really tell people that I toured it because it was really early. But I really loved it, and I remember sitting at a table and hearing someone say like, oh well, she's just going to end up at like shitty Tulane, not about me but about like someone else. And I remember being like, oh my gosh, that's like uncomfortable because I really like this school. So that thought always stuck with me.

Julia explained that that incident limited how much she talked about college with her peers and friends, and the quarantine helped her keep the process private:

I went through the process without being with my friends because it was during the bulk of the really bad quarantine period of May through August. So, I did it in secret, and my friends were really surprised to hear I got into Wake because they didn't even know I applied, which ended up being a pro because I could find the school that I really liked without hearing anyone's opinion of it. And that's always been like, great at the end of the day.

For Amanda, the pandemic seemed to have little impact on the relationships with her friends as she still found alternative ways to connect and communicate. Julia's experience was also positive as quarantining afforded her distance from her friends after a negative experience. As presented later in the findings, Julia found support through her parents. Therefore, even though the two girls needed different forms of support, both ended up with positive outcomes.

Despite having different experiences with their peers, Julia and Amanda, who had both been admitted ED, expressed similar periods of stress throughout the process, all of which would have been normal pressure points during a non-pandemic year. As Julia explained,

I think my stress really started honestly right before submitting my application just with like finishing the writing piece. And then also, after submitting your application that six-

week wait I had was like, the worst six weeks ever. I was overwhelmed with the thought, like all-consuming thought of like getting in or getting denied or deferred, so that was, I think, the two stressful pieces that I felt in the process.

Amanda also described seeing what her friends were going through in the process and relief that her college search was done:

I was definitely really nervous because I like I knew I wanted to go to Northwestern and didn't think it was gonna happen. So, I feel really lucky that I was able to have such a positive experience, especially when I'm watching my close friends like literally dying. Like friends I thought would easily get in were getting deferred, and people that I thought maybe would get deferred were getting rejected, and that was really jarring to see. Wow, like I just feel really lucky that I didn't have to go through stuff like that. I would definitely be stressed just trying to get back into the process for regular (decision). I think it could be hard when you're applying for all these other colleges while you're like grieving the fact that you're not going to your top school.

Similar to Julia, Sarah discussed not seeing her peers in person, "It was like kind of nice to not have to walk up and down the hallways and constantly hear people talking about college or seeing who's wearing their college sweatshirts. It was all more private, which I think helped me be less stressed about the whole thing." Nicole, who did not apply ED, expressed mixed feelings about her peers, stating, "I don't think that like I ever felt that like super competitiveness, with my classmates and maybe a part of that is because like we weren't together so maybe I didn't see it. I just didn't really feel that pressure like I've heard from the older girls from here." Both Sarah and Nicole, who did not apply ED, also described stressful points during their college search but without the sense of relief as they had yet to finish their process. Sarah explained,

“I’m glad I’m done with like my end of things. And, yeah, I think just being at home doing all of this, definitely for me felt a little bit more stressful, but I think now that I’m in the waiting period I’m still a little bit nervous but having it out of my hands is good.” Sarah also described the difficulties of being alone in her process:

I think that physical isolation definitely made the process feel a lot, a lot more different in that it was harder to like see what my peers and also adults were doing. And I think, you know, being at school would have helped with a lot of that as I would probably be working on some college stuff like around other people. And so I think the pandemic just made it feel a lot more stressful or pressured at times.

For Sarah, being isolated from her peers made her nervous at times because she could not see where everyone else was in their college process to know if she was falling behind. This feeling relates to Haydon’s (2015) study where she found a positive relationship between high levels of stress and feeling behind peers; however, this did not impact friendships quality. Haydon highlighted the complex psychological aspects of peer support. Even though young females may compare themselves against their peers, it does not necessarily diminish the strength and protective qualities of friendships.

Nicole expressed a similar sentiment to Sarah when asked about how she was feeling, “I would say I’m glad like it’s almost done, but I’m still feeling anxious. You know, just like awaiting results and like dealing with news like whether it’s bad or not great.” She also described stress and anxiety throughout her college search:

I think when the pandemic kind of started to pick up, it sort of increased that anxiety that was already there before because I was thinking, okay, now I already have all this stuff that I feel like I need to do, and now I need to find a way to work around these different,

unexpected circumstances so that definitely added an extra element. I don't know, just like reacting to that and trying to stay on top of school things, it's like okay, you've submitted your applications, but then it's still not over, and you need to do all this extra stuff. Are you gonna check back in with the colleges, and are you going to continue to show demonstrated interest, and it's just like, even though the application part is almost over, I feel like until you're at college like it's not over.

Adults in the study also described the positive and negative aspects of students being separated during the college process – albeit the advisors were more even sided in their analysis than the parents, who agreed the physical distance was beneficial. Advisor and Dean of Students Clarice described:

Not all of my kids know who has gotten into schools, and they are not sharing that information. It is probably less likely that other kids know because of COVID because there's just not that like, again, overhearing other people having conversations. I think the number of contacts a kid has right now, outside of the classes that they're in is very low, that they may have two or three people that they talk to regularly, and normally if they were seeing each other all the time, they might have 12 because they're in a sport or something and those are not really happening now.

Seniors, in particular lost bonding events and common spaces, including their fall retreat and the senior room – a senior only student lounge. School counselor and advisor Marie described, “They just aren’t seeing each other regularly. Even when they are here, the space that these conversations happened was the senior room, and they don’t have access to it.” She went on to describe the effects of the senior room, “that's where a lot of this stuff happens both positive and negative, as I've seen over the years. So that's just another place where I think kids

would get support from one another when maybe they're not in the same social circles.” Advisor and Dean of Students Clarice agreed with Marie and explained,

This group did not get a retreat in person, and this group does not have the senior room, and every year when we come up to the end of senior year, those are the two things that kids talk about as fully changing their experience as a class. That those were the moments that they came together as a group recognized that they are united, bonded, and committed to each other, whether they know each other well or not. They like make brand new friendships because they happen to have second period free, and therefore, they are in the senior room together at the same time. They look at this person in June and are like you and I were not friends junior year and now I call you a friend. They have none of that. So, if you think of it that way, then this is definitely impacting the college process and the feelings of like, I want to tell my second period hang out in the senior room crowd that I am really sad that that I didn't get into such and such college. Or I want to tell you know that second period crew that I did get it into such and such and I'm excited. That's all to say I think it's hard to separate so much of the like those questions of competition versus support, where we are (located) and our \$49,000 price tag and what we say that price tag pays for. I mean, there's just so much pressure there.

Advisor and class dean Jenna said, “I found that some of the discussions are happening on social media, and that can be damaging. And normally I think you know kids would be talking with others in person and it would defuse the situation, or it wouldn't have happened.” This scenario confirms the literature in that girls tend to be more relational and spend more time using technology to interact with their friends – however social media was not mentioned by the students (Muscanell & Guadagno, 2012). Through virtual learning, students' mode of

communication shifted almost entirely online. While there are positive benefits of social media, such as feeling close to others (Weinstein, 2018), frequent usage propagates social comparisons (Fagan, 2017; Simmons, 2018; Yau & Reich, 2019) and may cause anxiety (Daly, 2018).

Lisa, who participated exclusively in the parent focus group, and is also the chair of the English department at DBS, described her experience from both points of view:

I'm sort of thinking about all the kids I've walked through this sort of process, not my own children. I had my seatbelt fastened for a really tough year. And I didn't see the sort of anxiety that I normally see among kids, and again its child specific. I think for my daughter, not being with other kids 24-7 helped. I mean, she was with us so much more than she was with other kids. I think that sort of contagion of anxiety didn't get to her the way I've seen it get to other kids in the past. So, with no senior room, to get curled up in the fetal position and with no college reps visiting, the kids aren't able to see who's meeting with who. They had the Friday night Zoom get-togethers where the kids you know, talk to each other, but there wasn't that constant wall of chatter. From my point of view, just taking that out of the picture made this process halfway sane. On the downside, there was some backlash directed toward the people you live with, but I didn't see that fueling up into a big conflagration. So, again, kid specific, but I feel like that anxiety didn't bleed onto her as it may have otherwise.

Parent Brianne commented, “Yeah, it feels like they (students) are against each other, even if they're not meaning to be, I think it feels like they're against each other. This is a thing we have to deal with as a school.” Another parent, Karen added,

I mean, Brianne, I agree with you, and I was really glad they were not together around ‘lessons and deferrals’ time on campus. (The term ‘lessons and deferrals’ is a widely

known nickname for the annual holiday pageant at DBS called, ‘Lessons and Carols’ that occurs around the same that Ivy League colleges release early decisions.) I was thinking, I mean I’m sure they can support each other, but I think there are also some silver linings to what Lisa was saying and having some distance from some of the stress and the negativity around this process. There was just so much uncertainty and, and for my daughter in terms of how she was feeling. She really started to struggle with mental health issues that were exacerbated by those around her.

This sentiment aligns with the research, where being in a high-performing context may further exacerbate stress levels, especially in an all-girls environment, where students ruminate and talk to each other about the pressures of school (Låftman et al., 2013). It also supports research that peer stress can result in anxiety, depression, and other adjustment problems (Sontag et al., 2008). As Lisa described, she witnessed years of peer-related anxiety surrounding the college process. In a virtual environment, this was significantly diminished.

In summary, one of the most significant findings in this study is that *being away from their peers during the college admission cycle made the process less stressful for most students*. The girls had privacy and agency in a process that otherwise would have been potentially clouded by stress, pressure, and fear of judgment. In other words, being away from school enabled them to choose who they communicated with, and what they chose to share. As demonstrated throughout the findings, conversations surrounding the college admission process was limited, and appeared to happen with just a few close friends. The next theme describes how spending more time at home impacted students’ schedules and relationships with their families.

More Time at Home

In March of 2020, the city where DBS is located went on lockdown, and all schools were closed. Within days, DBS shifted all its instruction to online learning via Zoom. Students completed the 2019-2020 school year in a remote setting, and virtual learning continued once the 2020-2021 school year commenced in September. Starting in November of 2020, students could engage in hybrid instruction – returning to in-person schooling on a part-time basis. Quarantining immediately halted otherwise overbooked schedules resulting in significantly more time with family.

Extra time at home appeared to have a positive effect when it came to completing college applications. Nicole commented,

I think being at home has given me like a bit of flexibility and it actually did give me a chance to prioritize certain things and have a little bit more freedom for when I wanted to do stuff. For example, I'm someone who likes to write in the mornings, so I feel like if I was in person at school, that might not have been possible. Normally you're coming back from school after a long day, and then you have like sports and stuff so I might have been doing (applications) sort of whenever I could, whereas now I have a little bit more flexibility. I do think that that was kind of a benefit in some way.

The parents also talked about the positive side of their daughters having a break from their otherwise busy schedule. Brianne raised the point, “I hope DBS administrators were taking note as these girls didn't have the full-blown 110% of DBS academics at the same time as college apps, and it's still so much.”

In November of 2020, families were given the option of returning to in-person learning on a part-time basis. Many seniors had appreciated having a less busy schedule and took that into consideration when deciding whether to return to campus. Advisor Blaire said,

My advisees felt that the balance of being a senior and applying to colleges would be easier being remote. During the normal academic year, they would not have the option (to stay home) so they would be, you know, grinding it from eight to four then going to sports for two hours, then commuting home than starting their homework. I think the pandemic has lended itself to allow students to have more time to work. And so I think that is something that my advisees in particular have been very strategic about.

The added time not only helped in completing applications but gave families more time to discuss colleges. Advisor Marie said, “I think now they're actually forced to talk a little bit more with their parents whether you know, for better or worse.” The students and parents in the study only highlighted positive aspects of spending more time together. For Julia, who needed to convince her parents about her plan to apply ED, the additional time together was beneficial as she described,

We were definitely at home a lot more, so there were a lot of nights I spent talking through the college process, with my mom especially. We could sit down and like go through all of the information on the website. Thankfully that ended up being a pro instead of a con. I don't think if the pandemic hadn't happened, they would have been like, so, in, or I guess, knowledgeable about the schools that I was looking at.

Julia's mother, Brianne, confirmed the sentiment during the parent focus group by saying,

I think one of the blessings about this has been the time that we've been around each other, to have her process all of it. And truth be told, she had to do a little convincing to

her father and I. It gave us more time to work through that because we sat at the counter talking a lot more often and had more time together than we ever would have, which is helpful.

Parental support. Spending more time with their parents appeared to be a positive protective factor. Literature supports that strong parental relationships affect a child's wellbeing and are fundamental to an adolescents' development and transition into adulthood (Schiffrin et al., 2019). Moreover, in affluent homes, it is typical for fathers to have less of a presence due to demanding jobs (Ciciolla et al., 2017). The students in this study cited having more time with their parents during quarantining and made no implications that this was a negative experience. In fact, several students expressed that their parents were more supportive of the college search process after the pandemic started than before. A few reasons for this increase in support may be that parents felt sympathy for their daughters having to go through a global pandemic or that they witnessed firsthand the time required to complete college applications.

While most students expressed positive sentiments about their parent's level of support, there was evidence of daughters wanting to please their parents and meet certain expectations. Both students and parents were asked about their perceptions of the parental role in the college admission process. Two topics emerged – support and expectations.

Students were asked about their parents' role in their college admission process pre-pandemic and if that role changed during the pandemic. All the parents and students in the study saw the parental role as a supportive one, albeit some parents were more involved in the process than others. Furthermore, while recognizing the support of their parents, many students claimed agency and independence in their college search. Nicole described her parents as always being caring and there for her when she needed them, “they're there to support me and to sort of guide

me in any way that they can but of course ultimately it's in my hands. I think if anything, maybe they were more supportive because of the circumstances and helped me wherever they could.”

Julia made it clear that she was the one driving her process explaining,

I kind of got to say, I'm going to handle this on my own because I'm doing the college process on my own like I've (been doing) since day one. I found my own tutor, and the testing centers that I really wanted to go to, and I planned all of our trips. I was like, I need a parent or guardian to take me, but that's it. But I also do think that's a privilege to have because my parents were financially able to say, wherever you end up, we're going to support you in the end. So that was definitely something that I do realize and did not take for granted and also recognize was a privilege of mine. (Now that it's over) my parents definitely thank me on a regular basis that it was done and over with very quickly. Genuinely my mom thanks me I think every day because she sees her friends and what they're going through, and this year has felt very challenging.

The parents also described their girls as having independence in the process. Karen said, “These are DBS girls so...” Lisa immediately chimed in, agreeing, “Yeah, talk about drivers right, I think we have drivers.” Lisa’s husband Steve added, “yeah I just tell her, I’m here if you need me honey” as everyone laughed. Lisa then shared an example, “there one time she asked me to look at her common app essay, and I told her I didn't like it, she didn't talk to me for three days. It was ugly. And I was like, all right, don't ask for my honest feedback!” This conversation alluded to the culture at DBS that the girls are highly driven and self-motivated.

Despite the parents’ conversation about their daughter’s independence, there was a lot of “we” language when describing student responsibilities. For example, “when are *we* going to take the standardized tests...” or “when *we* applied...” College also seemed to be a constant

conversation in households, with Amanda stating, “I don’t bring college up because my parents bring it up all the time. And because I’m home more, they bring it up more.” Without being prompted about parents, and advisor Clarice raised the point:

I do wonder the impact (of parents), and I don't have a ton of evidence but, obviously, the parents are around more physically, so how much did it impact the relationship between kid and parent. And how much are the parents, even more invested in the college outcome because they were like, physically around a kid who is trying to fill out those applications.

Again, most students expressed that their parents just wanted them to be happy. However, there was still an underlying expectation and pressure of applying to and being accepted at what their parents deemed to be acceptable colleges. Amanda said, “They were pretty involved. Getting into college is like a pretty big thing in Asian culture.” She described how she wanted to study journalism in college, but her parents didn’t think that was a practical major. “I felt like I was going to college and studying computer science to appease my parents. So ever since I decided to go into journalism, it wasn't like I'm doing this for them, it was very much like I'm doing this thing for me.” She explained that her parents thought it would be difficult to get a job with a journalism degree and even more so from a lower-ranking school.

So they ended up saying we would be okay with you studying journalism if you went to Northwestern, the number one journalism school in the country, but other than that, we probably want you to double major. Even though I was accepted to Northwestern, my mom still wants me to double major in computer science, but I don't think I will. If things had turned out differently, I definitely would double major in like journalism and something else.

Had Amanda not been admitted, her parents would have forced her to study computer science. They were afraid that if she studied journalism at a lower ranking school, she would be unable to get a job after graduating. While Amanda attributes this to Asian culture, this scenario reinforced Lapour and Heppner's 2009 study in that only pre-professional majors that lead to high-paying careers are acceptable to most affluent families.

Nicole seemed to feel a combination of internal and external pressure, citing pressure from both herself and her support systems. When asked about parental expectations, she said,

I think most of the pressure feels like it's coming more from like myself, and I don't know maybe like, the people around me. But I think like mostly just the expectations that I have for myself. Thinking about this is a big step, and like, where am I going to spend the next four years. I don't think that that pressure really came from my parents too much I think that they're like, you can go wherever and like as long as you're happy like, that's fine.

Overall, for the children, spending significantly more time with their parents appeared to be a positive experience and protective factor of their wellbeing throughout the pandemic and college application process. Yet, parents themselves continued to feel pressure. Advisors recognized the importance of parental support. Advisor Clarice expressed having empathy for the families of her advisees during quarantine and virtual learning, stating,

I think I was more intentional in creating that relationship with parents when we moved to virtual. I like to send them semi-regular emails just to check in with them separately because, and maybe this is my role as a parent, I feel like the strain on parents right now is pretty high. So, I tried to give them good things, like your kids are doing great are handing things so if you're getting the negative emotions realize that they're like showing

up, they're doing what they're supposed to do, they're leading and really terrific ways.

You know, if you want to know certain information, please reach out, I have so many great things to say, you know, hang in there kind of moment. So when some of my students got bad news, they (parents) did share college news where in the past they might not have, because I was asking for them to share with me.

Interestingly, the parents raised a new topic about stress surrounding college admissions due to the pandemic as they were witnessing anxiety from other parents, which may have influenced their ability to provide support to their children. Lisa described:

There is a lot of chitchat among parents about what were the EDI yields looking like and where we are this year compared to other years, so I asked college guidance and they said the rates were the same. And I thought that was so interesting because I'm wondering if like COVID just created this perception. And it's so much worse if you read the DC Urban Moms blog, which I do for entertainment, they are like out of control. They are like this is the worst year ever, and they (the colleges) hate the DMV area privates, the publics, charters, we're all dying here!

The other parents echoed Lisa's statement and said they had heard similar stories about declining admission rates and uncertainty surrounding the process. The parents also discussed making the tendency for people to compare children and their schools, specifically on DC Urban Moms – an online forum catering to local, upper-class parents and a platform to discuss various issues related to their children (referenced by Lisa above). With the college admission process being more competitive than at any point in history (Mehaffey, 2020), and a child's success is how family success is measured, parents now feel that “college entrance has become your final exam as a parent” (Marano, 2005). However, research in this field suggests that achievement

pressure from parents does not help a child develop and succeed academically (Ciciolla et al., 2017). In this study, parents expressed more anxiety surrounding the college process than their children. Possible reasons for this may be that they themselves were overwhelmed with pandemic related stress while also trying to shield their children from it. Evidence shows that in healthy parent-child relationships, parents attempt to protect their children from stressful events (Blattner et al, 2013). Moreover, high achieving mothers tend to want to do it all and take care of their families before taking care of themselves (Luthar, 2003; Luthar & Latendresse, 2005) - further perpetuating the cycle and pressure for women to be the best.

Having more time at home positively impacted the wellbeing of DBS students as they were freed from their dizzying schedule of commuting and extracurricular activities. This meant students had more time than they normally would have to complete college essays and applications – relieving some of the stress and pressure in the process. Additionally, all of the girls in the study reported benefits from spending more time with their parents, who served as a support system in the absence of their traditional school structure. The final theme describes changes in relationships among students and adults at school during virtual learning and the college process.

Relationships with school adults

Virtual learning undoubtedly impacted the way that students and faculty engaged with one another. Transitioning to Zoom forced students to more intentional about communicating with adults at school. Moreover, students and adults reported feeling like conversations were less organic as speaking on Zoom puts all of the attention on the individual who is speaking. Advisors also expressed great concern about their advisees as they were unable to see them in person and check on their wellbeing. The final theme describes student interactions among

students and adults at school, including the role of the advisor in the college admission process and how their relationship changed during the pandemic.

Advisors are teachers or staff who serve as an academic and emotional support system for the girls at DBS. Each advisor is assigned to 7-8 students who form a homeroom group that meets together twice per week for the entirety of the student's high school career. Advisors also work with parents and serve as a conduit between families and teachers. At DBS, an advisor should be the one adult at school who knows the child the best and serves as both a mentor and an advocate. Note that DBS has a separate College Guidance Department that engages with students starting in the winter of their junior year. While the college guidance counselors work with the logistical side of the college admission process, the primary advisor is the supportive mainstay. Both students and advisors were asked about the role of the advisor, particularly during the college admission process and if anything changed during the pandemic.

All the advisors agreed that their role in assisting their advisees during the college admission process was to be supportive and listen to their students' joys and concerns through the process but defer to the College Guidance Department for specifics about college. When asked about their role as an advisor during their students' college search, Ellen expressed, "It's mostly, to sort of check in with students and their families about the college process but not to be firsthand involved, like, referring them to our college advisory department, but not to be an active participant in that process." Clarice added,

I agree that if students or parents wanted to talk about it that the role of the advisor is certainly to listen and to provide an opportunity for families just to have another member of the community hear their thoughts, also potentially to share those thoughts with the college office in ways that would be supportive and helpful.

Advisor Ben added, “What I always try to do is just temper expectations about the (college) process and just to be clear that like reasonable expectations are important.”

When students were asked about the role of their advisors during their college search process, they also referenced having a positive relationship with them but did not rely on them for support during the process. Julia noted, “My advisor was really, really, supportive, but I didn’t tell her about my college stuff.” Amanda described a similar scenario,

My advisor, Ellen, is 110% my emotional support. But during virtual learning I don't know it just felt like a little more awkward just because it's like Zoom and there's a lot of people in homeroom, and not everyone's super comfortable talking about college, and you don't know how comfortable everyone is, stuff like that. So, I think I definitely relied on her less.

When speaking on Zoom, students felt like they were in the spotlight. Amanda commented, “Normally there’s a lot of different conversation going on at once, but here in Zoom, you know like what Zoom does that thing where one person talks like everyone else shut up and listen, it's like really annoying.” Nicole expressed a similar sentiment,

I definitely feel like when we're in person, it's a lot more natural. It's more of a conversation and like people are just talking and new things come up and your advisor will help you through it as well like your peers. Whereas when it's virtual, it's very much like you know you're unmuteing to say something. Whatever you say, it's got to be important.

Advisors related to the change in the dynamic of their classes and homerooms. When asked if students in their homerooms were talking about college, Ben said, “I think conversations

just don't come up as it's harder for them to come up because there's not as much spontaneity of conversation.” Similarly, Clarice described,

Yeah, one of the things that I noticed, too, in general, is the Zoom homeroom meeting doesn't provide for like cross conversation or side conversation. And so often, you would hear a lot about the college process, mostly while students were talking to each other. In the absence of having kids in your room and talking to each other, unless someone brought it up specifically to you as the advisor, it didn't. It wasn't part of homeroom as often.

Overall, students also reported having less contact with their teachers and advisors. Sarah observed, “I think not being at school I wasn't really in contact as much as I would have been with like teachers or adults and having to either email or schedule a meeting probably made it more of an effort for me to connect with adult resources.” Nicole shared a similar comment,

I feel like there are always some things that it's just like, easier to kind of ask in person, or that's a little more natural in a conversation. I know like I sent a lot of emails, which again like might have been a little bit easier on both sides if like if we had been in person and it could have just like gone in and like asked or something. However, I think there still was a lot of support from the college guidance and, they were always reaching out to us and like making sure that that didn't become a problem.

Julia discussed that she did not use her advisor as a source of support because it was more of an effort during virtual learning, “I think just not being at school, I really wasn't in contact as much with teachers or other adults and having to either email or schedule a meeting made it more of an effort for me to connect with adult resources. I felt a lot more pressure on my end.”

Additionally, advisors voiced concern about not seeing their students as often during virtual learning. As Jenna, an advisor and class dean, explained,

For me, the main difference has been that now I'm more worried about them, when before I wasn't worried a bit. I know they're gonna get into college, and it'll all end up fine, but I'm worried about how they're feeling about it more now than before. I usually don't worry about it because they have so many supports, you know in place with being at school that kind of goes without saying, and now that they're really just at home and we don't have that contact. I feel like I gotta reach out to them and meet with them and just to see how they're doing. I felt like we need to support them more just because they're going through a lot of stuff right now, and they might feel isolated and down about themselves.

Moreover, advisors were concerned about their advisees as they lost their safe space to vent and share emotions. This made their advisors nervous, with Clarice commenting, "...you know, those emotions were processed somewhere, it's just a question where?" Ben added, "I think the kids I've had who have really struggled, they probably would have struggled either way. But it's hard to tell since we've had so much less interaction with them."

Ellen (Amanda's advisor) explained that just because teachers did not see any changes with their students did not mean that they were all okay:

I'm just being practical like in some of the tangible ways, for example, no senior room, they had a different kind of social network and experience in their lives. And so they were forced then to process it differently. And yes, I think that the students in my advisory who are struggling with their mental health that there was already evidence of that prior to the pandemic. But I do think that, and I could never quantify how much or what

percentage, but it's clear to me that for all of them, something about trying to manage stress in their lives affected them. It has affected their health. And I think the college process is part of that.

When specifically asked about the wellbeing of students during virtual learning, several advisors commented that the students who were struggling before the pandemic, for the most part, continued to struggle after it started. Before the pandemic, advisors maintained and shared a list of students they were concerned about and most of those same names remained on the list throughout virtual learning. This aligns with early COVID-19 research that revealed mental health deteriorated intra-pandemic, especially in girls and those who reported higher levels of anxiety and depression pre-pandemic (Magson et al., 2020). (On the contrary, some students are thriving in virtual learning (Fleming, 2020) including participants in this study). However, as the literature notes, kids such as Karen's daughter, who had no history of mental illness, went undetected by her teachers. As described in the literature review, girls tend to internalize their feelings (Sontag et al., 2008) which often makes it difficult for teachers and administrators to identify students in need of care as many "fly under the radar" (Flett et al., 2018, p. 357).

Additionally, advisors commented on the girls' decline in physical appearances, such as not showering or looking like they just rolled out of bed for Zoom class. A study of teenagers conducted early in the pandemic revealed signs of mental health deterioration, especially in girls and those who reported higher levels of anxiety and depression compared to pre-pandemic rates (Alonzi, Torre, & Silverstein, 2020). Alternatively, the scenario the advisors described could also be due to students quarantining and not leaving their homes. They are out of the routine and do not have to get up, shower, get dressed, and commute to school. Moreover, this is the first time

that adults at school were seeing students in their home environment. Again, it is hard to untangle individual constructs when dealing with all aspects of COVID-19.

While adults at school can be a protective factor for children (Luthar & Kumar, 2018), due to the pandemic and virtual schooling, teachers and advisors had less of a presence in DBS students' lives. The nature of Zoom limited informal side conversations and therefore students had to make more of an effort to connect with adults. It is evident that the adults at DBS care deeply about their students, particularly advisors, who expressed concern and worry about no longer seeing their advisees in person. However, the impact on the wellbeing of students in this study is unclear. Students noted the change in their relationships with school adults but did not express concern over the change – particularly regarding the college admission process.

Summary of Key Findings

As presented in the findings and discussion, five themes emerged from the qualitative data. Figure 4.2 summarizes key findings by theme.

Figure 4.2. Depiction of findings by theme

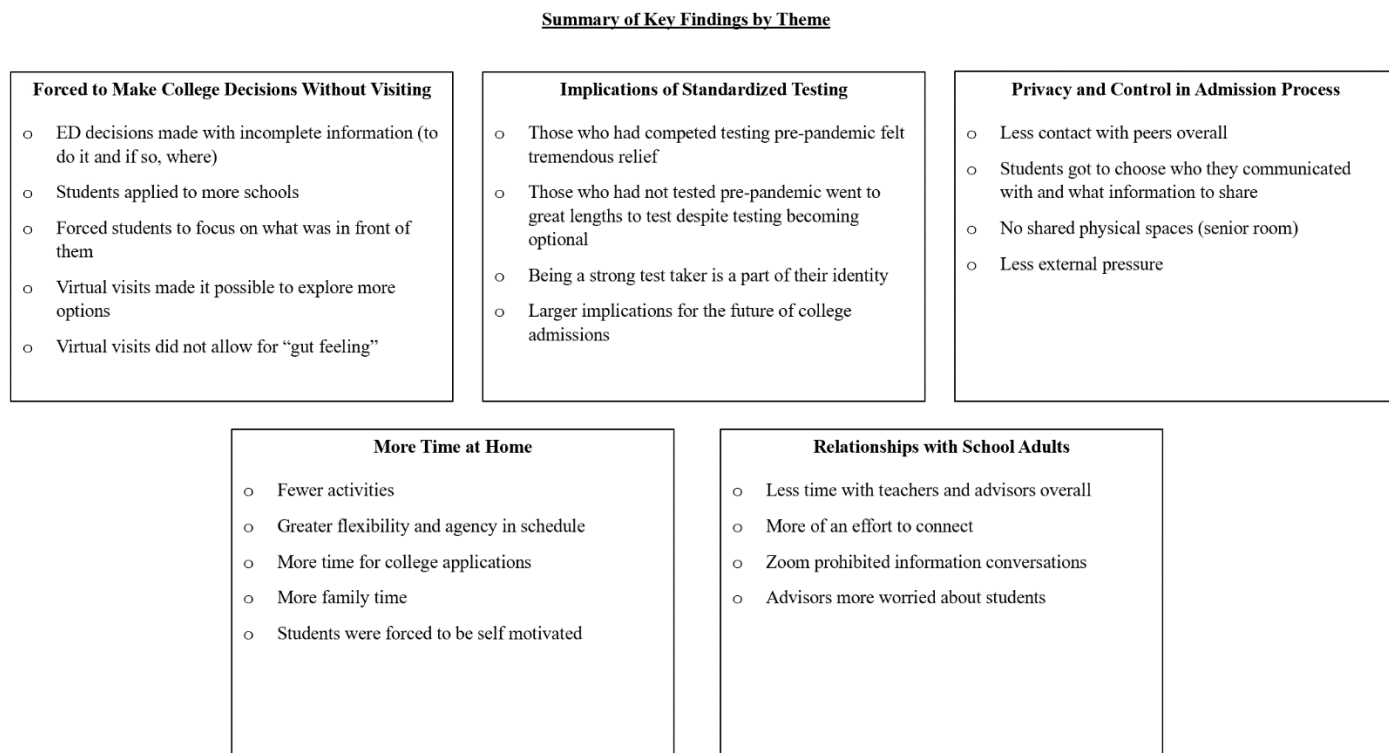


Figure 4.2. Depiction of findings by theme.

In the context of this study, the impact of COVID-19 both harmed and improved student wellbeing. First, it forced students to make college decisions without visiting. As presented in the findings, for several students, this caused additional strain as it was difficult for them to create their college list and decide on an ED application. Yet, for other students, the inability to visit schools helped them focus their list and explore colleges virtually. Changes in standardized testing worsened the wellbeing of those who had not tested before the pandemic as they did not see testing as optional (despite the colleges removing the requirement). As noted earlier, one of the most significant findings in this study is that gaining privacy in the admission process benefited students and their wellbeing as they were physically separated from their peers and therefore, had control over with whom and what college information they shared. Another

improvement to the girls' wellbeing was having more time at home. They had control over their schedule and more free time without all of their normal extracurricular activities. The students also benefited from spending more time with their parents, who served as a support system throughout the college admission process. Finally, as referenced in the discussion of spending less time adults at school, it is unclear how this change impacted student wellbeing. While the students referenced the negative features of communicating on Zoom, they did not reference missing the support of their advisors. It is possible that spending more time with family replaced the support system at school.

Connecting Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Findings from Chapter 2 and Chapter 4 are represented in a joint display (Table 4.4). A joint display integrates both quantitative and qualitative by portraying both sets of data in the same table (Creswell & Clark, 2007). The table summarizes data related to student wellbeing and support systems from throughout the study.

Table 4.4

Joint Display of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

Significant IHSC Factors	Student Interviews	Parent Focus Group	Advisor Focus Group
Poor mental health	Good mental health – away from peers during college process, more time with family, more free time	Good mental health – away from peers during college process, more time with family, more free time	Good mental health – away from peers during college process, more free time
	Poor mental health – stress, anxiety, uncertainty about college process including testing	Poor mental health – stress, anxiety, uncertainty about college process, including testing	Poor mental health – stress, anxiety, questioned support systems outside of school and where emotions were being processed, worried about those with pre-

Significant IHSC Factors	Student Interviews	Parent Focus Group	Advisor Focus Group
			existing mental health concerns, lack of hygiene
Pressure to succeed	Prominent in DBS culture. Parents were both supportive and contributed to pressure	Prominent in DBS culture, and in the local area	Prominent in DBS culture
Extrinsically motivated	Want to make parents proud	Did not mention	Motivated by college admissions
Intrinsically motivated	Want to make themselves proud. Completed standardized testing despite it being optional. Stayed motivated during virtual learning/less contact with school adults.	“These are DBS girls” “These are drivers”	Did not mention
Have strong friendships	Strong friendships and support but also moments of judgement. Benefited from privacy and control in the admission process.	Sees friends as competition and source of stress during college process. Benefited from privacy and control in the admission process.	Sees social groups getting smaller and amount of information shared limited during virtual learning. Benefited from privacy and control in the admission process.

While the IHSC survey results presented in Chapter 2 paint a grim picture of student mental health at DBS, as seen in Chapter 4, there were positive mental health outcomes related to the pandemic during the college admission process, including a break from busy schedules and time away from peer pressure. Signs of intrinsic motivation were particularly evident regarding standardized testing, where students were unwilling to forgo the optional exam. Moreover, while girls referenced needing to manage their own schedule and remain productive during virtual

learning, there was no evidence that they failed at these independent tasks. The parents reinforced high levels of intrinsic motivation by making statements like, “These are DBS girls” and “These are drivers.” These statements also underpin the culture of DBS and the elevated pressure to succeed. It is recommended that the College Guidance Office at DBS continue to research and monitor all the significant IHSC factors and the role they play in the college admission process (particularly in a non-pandemic year).

Limitations

This study has several limitations, including the small size of the qualitative portion, lack of longevity, and inability to separate the relationship among variables. First, the qualitative study involved 6 of the 75 students, 6 of 8 senior advisors, and four parents. While the sample size of the qualitative data was small, nearly all students participated in the quantitative study. This research is representative of DBS students but may not be generalizable to similar schools.

This study captured two snapshots in time. The quantitative data were collected in October of 2019 (pre-pandemic) and the quantitative data were collected during the middle of the seniors’ college admission process (during the pandemic). It is recommended that future studies include additional data collection points, and follow multiple cohorts, which is something that was not possible in this study due to the pandemic.

Finally, as mentioned earlier in the discussion, it is hard to untangle constructs related to the effects of the pandemic, virtual learning, and the college admission process. COVID-19 was the first global pandemic of the modern era. Therefore, there were few studies in existence to help delineate constructs. However, this study contributes to the early literature related to COVID-19, which is sure to expand in the years to come.

Implications

While schools are moving back to “normal,” it is still unclear what the new normal will be. As highlighted throughout the qualitative findings, summary of key findings, and connecting quantitative and qualitative research sections of this chapter, the consequences of COVID-19 both harmed and improved student wellbeing during the college admission process. A notable finding was that having time away from peers lessened admission-related stress. With schools returning to in-person learning, it is an important reminder that while teenagers benefit from being together, they may also benefit from having some time apart. Of the other two primary support systems, parents and adults at school, only the relationship with the parents flourished during the pandemic. While students stated that their advisors were supportive, they did not rely on them during virtual learning and the college admission process and were able to manage on their own. It is possible that spending more time with family filled this void. The pandemic proved to be a sizeable shift in family dynamics as everyone was able to have more time at home.

One lasting change in the college admission process is the continuation of colleges being test-optional or no longer requiring standardized test scores. During the 2020-2021 application cycle (represented in this study), Ivy League and highly selective colleges and universities saw a record number of applications. With test scores becoming optional, there were few barriers to the competitive admission process. Strong students with lower test scores are now in contention, creating more diversity in the applicant pool. As described in Chapter 1, prep schools in the Northeast, a traditional pipeline for Ivy League universities, have been facing greater competition and declining admission rates for the past decade. Conventional college “hooks” such as being a legacy student or living in a wealthy zip code, no longer carry as much weight as

colleges seek to expand diversity and equity on their campuses (Chace, 2013, p. 67). COVID-19 forced test scores out of the equation, making the competition even more challenging.

This is not to say that eliminating test scores is a negative factor, especially as it promotes access and equity in highly selective admissions. However, by using the word test “optional” may further exacerbate the need for affluent females to be “supergirls” or the need to be everything to everyone (Hinshaw & Kranz, 2009). Taking the most demanding course loads, at the nation’s most rigorous high schools, perfect grades and test scores, may no longer be enough. Girls are already pressured to have a full schedule packed with extracurricular activities. Knowing how overscheduling may negatively impact mental health, it is worrisome to think about the future of this population and their desire to stand out in the highly competitive admission process. The bottom line is that while testing may be “optional,” nothing is deemed optional for girls in high achieving schools.

Recommendations

It is important to recognize that this population was struggling with significant mental health challenges before COVID-19. While at the same time, DBS and similar prep schools cannot ignore its \$50,000+ price tag and the expectations that accompany it. Following this study, the researcher recommends the short-term goal of embedding a mental wellness program within the college guidance curriculum, and long-term goals of studying the test optional movement, preparing students for a test-optional admissions process, and readministering the IHSC survey.

The short term, recommendation emerging from this study is the need to incorporate mental wellness into the college guidance curriculum. With evidence that DBS students are both intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, they need to be educated on what they can and cannot

control in the process. They also need to have training on the dangers of rumination and the toxic culture it creates and healthy ways to internalize and externalize stress.

To aid in mental health education, the school should facilitate conversations on promoting a healthy college-going culture, including how to announce college decisions at school and on social media. As demonstrated in this study, having a break from being around peers while applying to college appeared to make the process less stressful. While it is impossible to recreate in a post-pandemic school environment, educating students about healthy relationships with peers regarding college is essential.

Parents also need to be included in conversations about mental health and college expectations. Well-educated themselves, there needs to be greater transparency of how significantly admission rates have declined in the last 20-40 years when they applied to college. More importantly, there needs to be greater transparency about the severity of mental health issues at DBS, the ramifications of a high-achieving culture, and ways to promote healthy expectations.

Long term, the college guidance office should conduct longitudinal research on the impact of colleges going test-optional. By collecting and learning from the data, the guidance office can better understand how colleges read test-optional applications and in turn, provide better advice to students as to whether they need the test. As demonstrated in this study, the test-optional movement impacts high achieving students' wellbeing as most do not consider it optional and it is one more stressor in the process.

While some may argue that colleges should be test free or test blind (not accept any standardized testing), this is a knee-jerk reaction to eliminating stress and ambiguity. Universities must first gather several years academic and retention data to glean information

about the success of their test-optional students – particularly Ivy League and other highly selective institutions, who are new to adopt a test-optional policy.

The second long term goal is to plan for test-optional policies to remain in place at many higher education institutions indefinitely. If test scores are no longer going to help affluent students stand out in the applicant pool, high schools need to facilitate meaningful programming and activities to help their students be compelling applicants at highly selective colleges and universities. Colleges are not looking for well-rounded applicants, rather, they need well-rounded classes, comprised of students with depth, expertise, and talent in their individual fields.

Not only will parents expect such activities (internships, independent projects, research, etc.), but if the school does not take the lead, students are at continued risk of overextending themselves. Independent schools are in the unique position to mindfully embed programming into their curriculums, so these opportunities do not become one more thing on a student's plate, and instead replace existing requirements in captivating ways.

Finally, it is recommended that the school revisit the results from the October 2019 IHSC survey and readminister the assessment for more accurate data about the wellbeing of students' post-pandemic. Only then will DBS learn about protective factors, stress points, and wellbeing in a post-pandemic year.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 global pandemic forced schools into a virtual environment in a matter of days. Students, teachers, and families were plunged into months of quarantine, which fundamentally changed social dynamics. Through a literature review on the wellbeing of affluent female adolescents and a subsequent data collection of DBS students, it is clear that this population was at risk of and suffering from mental health issues prior to the pandemic. This

chapter contributes to the literature as it examined the wellbeing of a subset of affluent females applying to college during COVID-19.

The full impact of virtual learning and applying to college during the COVID-19 global pandemic will be researched for years to come. This small study unpacked the experience for a group of affluent females attending a high achieving school. While some may assume that the pandemic caused greater stress in the already pressure-filled college admission process, for several students, being away from the constant comparison among peers made the process surprisingly less stressful. Moreover, with the cancellation of activities and shift to virtual schooling, their once overscheduled lives slowed dramatically, allowing for more thoughtful conversations with family members and time to complete lengthy college applications.

The college application process itself also changed because of the pandemic, as students could not complete standardized testing. Colleges dropped this requirement for the 2020-2021 cycle. At the publication of this study, most universities have announced continuing this practice, citing greater access and diversity in their applicant pools. While the full impact of this decision is yet to be seen, for affluent females attending high achieving schools, it could continue lowering their chances of admission – exacerbating their pressure to be the best.

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Appendix A



September 10, 2020

Dear Johns Hopkins University, Institutional Review Board:

Alisha Couch, an employee at National Cathedral School, and a doctoral candidate in the Doctor of Education program at Johns Hopkins University, has our approval to collect data from willing students, parents, and staff for use in her dissertation research. Additionally, she has permission to use data we collected via the Independent School Health Check survey, which we administered in 2019. The school obtained permission from the students' parents/caregivers to administer the survey. Alisha will receive the aggregated dataset, meaning she will have no individual student information.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads 'Susan C. Bosland'.

Sue Bosland
Head of School
National Cathedral School

Appendix B

Participant Recruitment Emails

Student emails

Initial student email:

Dear (student name)

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As a student who has gone through this process, I hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes an interview, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 20-30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

Follow-up email submitted one week following the initial mail:

Dear (student name)

Just a reminder, I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As a student who has gone through this process, I hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes an interview, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 20-30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

Parent emails

Initial student email:

Dear (Parent name)

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As someone with a child who has gone through this process, I hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes a focus group, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

Follow-up email submitted one week following the initial mail:

Dear (Parent name)

Just a reminder, I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As someone with a child who has gone through this process, I hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes a focus group, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

Advisor emails

Initial student email:

Dear (Advisor name)

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As an advisor of students who have gone through this process, I

hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes a focus group, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

Follow-up email submitted one week following the initial mail:

Just a reminder, Dear (Advisor name)

I am currently pursuing a doctorate degree at Johns Hopkins University and my dissertation work is exploring the wellbeing of female adolescents going through the college admission process. As a part of my dissertation research, entitled, *The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School*, I am conducting a research study to investigate the impact of applying to college during COVID-19. As an advisor of students who have gone through this process, I hope you will consider participating in my study. Participation includes a focus group, conducted over zoom, that will last approximately 30 minutes. Your insight will help us better understand how COVID-19 impacted the college admission process.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email.

Thank you for your consideration,

Alisha Couch

**JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
HOMEWOOD INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (HIRB)**

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Study Title: The Diminishing Wellbeing of Students During the College Admission Process at a High Achieving, All-Girls School

Application No.: HIRB00011849

Principal Investigator: Carey Borkoski, Ph.D., Ed.D

Assistant Professor, School of Education
Johns Hopkins University
2800 N Charles St, Baltimore, MD 21218
410-302-1589
cborkoski@jhu.edu

You are being asked to join a student research study. Participation in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to join now, you can change your mind later.

1. Research Summary (Key Information):

The information in this section is intended to be an introduction to the study only. Complete details of the study are listed in the sections below. If you are considering participation in the study, the entire document should be discussed with you before you make your final decision. You can ask questions about the study now and at any time in the future.

The purpose of this research study is to assess the wellbeing of adolescent females and the impact of COVID-19 on their college admission process. Students will be asked to voluntarily participate in a 20-30 minute interview conducted via Zoom. The semi-structured interview questions will inquire about their college admission process pre and post pandemic. Additionally, we will ask about the involvement of the student's parents, teachers, and peers in the college process. Parents and advisors of seniors will be asked to voluntarily participate in a 30 minute focus group to learn about their perception of student experiences going through the college admission process during COVID-19. The focus groups will be conducted via Zoom and led by the student investigator. The audio

of each interview will be recorded using Recorder + and transcribed using Otter online transcription service on a password protected device. The risks to the participants are minimal. The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life [or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests]. Participants will be reflecting on their experience going through the college admission process during a pandemic. This study may benefit society if the results lead to a better understanding of applying to college during a pandemic. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym to ensure protection of confidentiality. Minimal consequences would arise in the event that confidentiality/privacy was breached and the identity of respondents was known, because questions in this survey are objective in nature and do not address sensitive or personal information. A password-protected Excel file containing the names of participants and their email addresses in addition to all research material will be created and kept on a secure drive. This file will be permanently deleted once the data has been collected and dissertation written.

2. Why is this research being done?

This research is being done to assess the wellbeing of adolescent females and the impact of COVID-19 on their college admission process. Seniors attending National Cathedral School (NCS), who are at least 18 years of age at the time of data collection may participate in the study. Additionally, parents and advisors of eligible students qualify for the study. We anticipate that about 12 people will take part in this study.

3. What will happen if you join this study?

If you agree to be in this study, we will ask you to do the following things:

- ***Students*** will be asked to participate in one interview via Zoom that will last approximately 20-30 minutes, during a mutually agreed upon time. We will ask questions about their college admission process pre and post pandemic. Additionally, we will ask about the involvement of their parents, teachers, and peers in the college process.
- ***Parents and advisors*** will be asked to participate in one focus group via Zoom that will last approximately 30 minutes. We will ask questions about their involvement in their student/child's college admission process and their perception of the student/child's wellbeing.

Audio recordings:

As part of this research, we are requesting your permission to create and use an audio recording. Any recording will not be used for advertising or non-study related purposes.

You should know that:

- You may request that the audio recording be stopped at any time.

- If you agree to allow the audio recording and then change your mind, you may ask us to destroy that recording. If the recording has had all identifiers removed, we may not be able to do this.
- We will only use these audio recordings for the purposes of this research. The audio recording will be transcribed by an outside application (otter.ai) that stores data until deleted by the user, which will occur upon receipt of the transcription.

Please indicate your decision below by checking the appropriate statement:

_____ I **agree** to allow the study to make and use audio recordings of me (or the participant I represent) for the purpose of this study.

_____ I **do not agree** to allow the study team to make and use audio recordings of me (or the participant I represent) for the purpose of this study.

Participant Signature
(or Legally Authorized Representative Signature, if applicable)

Date

4. What are the risks or discomforts of the study?

The risks associated with participation in this study are no greater than those encountered in daily life [or during the performance of routine physical or psychological examinations or tests].

5. Are there benefits to being in the study?

You may or may not benefit from being in this study. Students will have the opportunity to reflect on their college admission experience with the acknowledgement that their process may have been impacted by COVID-19. Students may recognize their resilience in going through this process. Parents and advisors will also have the opportunity to reflect on their students' experiences with the process.

This study may benefit society if the results lead to a better understanding of how students going through the college admission process were impacted by COVID-19.

6. What are your options if you do not want to be in the study?

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You choose whether to participate. If you decide not to participate, there are no penalties, and you will not lose any benefits to which you would otherwise be entitled.

7. Will it cost you anything to be in this study?

No.

8. Will you be paid if you join this study?

No.

9. Can you leave the study early?

- If you want to withdraw from the study, please contact Alisha Couch at acouch2@jhu.edu. Leaving this study early will not affect your employment/education.

10. Why might we take you out of the study early?

You may be taken out of the study if:

- You fail to follow instructions.
- The study is cancelled.
- There may be other reasons to take you out of the study that we do not know at this time.

If you are taken out of the study early, Johns Hopkins may use or give out your information that it has already collected if the information is needed for this study or any follow-up activities.

11. How will the confidentiality of your biospecimens and/or data be protected?

Any study records that identify you will be kept confidential to the extent possible by law. The records from your participation may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including members of the Johns Hopkins University Homewood Institutional Review Board and officials from government agencies such as the National Institutes of Health and the Office for Human Research Protections. (All of these people are required to keep your identity confidential.) Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records.

A password-protected Excel file containing the names of participants and their email addresses as well as all data related to this study will be created and kept on a secure drive at 4440 Willard Ave., Apt, 220. Chevy Chase, MD, 20815. This file will be permanently deleted once the data has been collected and dissertation written.

What should you do if you have questions about the study?

Call the principal investigator, Carey Borkoski at 410-302-1589. If you wish, you may contact the principal investigator by letter. The address is on page one of this consent form. If you cannot reach the principal investigator or wish to talk to someone else, call the IRB office at 410-516-5680.

You can ask questions about this research study now or at any time during the study, by talking to the researcher working with you or by calling the student investigator at 614-306-5392.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or feel that you have not been treated fairly, please call the Homewood Institutional Review Board at Johns Hopkins University at (410) 516-6580.

12. What does your signature on this consent form mean?

Your signature on this form means that: You understand the information given to you in this form, you accept the provisions in the form, and you agree to join the study. You will not give up any legal rights by signing this consent form.

**WE WILL GIVE YOU A COPY OF THIS SIGNED AND DATED
CONSENT FORM**

Signature of Participant
Date/Time

(Print Name)

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent
Date/Time

(Print Name)

NOTE: A COPY OF THE SIGNED, DATED CONSENT FORM MUST BE KEPT BY THE PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR; A COPY MUST BE GIVEN TO THE PARTICIPANT.

Appendix D

Student Interview Questions:

1. How far into your college search and application process were you just prior to the pandemic?
 - a. How were you feeling about the process up until that point?
2. Do you think the pandemic impacted your college application process? If so, how?
3. How were your parents involved in your application process before the pandemic?
 - a. Did their involvement change once the pandemic began? If so, how?
4. Did your peers and friends influence your college admission process before the pandemic? If so, how?
 - a. What about after the pandemic began? Did their influence change?
5. How much did you rely on your teachers, advisors, and counselors for information and/or support about the college admission process pre-pandemic?
 - a. What about during the pandemic? Did your reliance on or need for teachers, advisors, and counselors for information and/or support about the college admission process change during the pandemic? If so, how?
6. How are you feeling about your college application process overall? (Be ready for follow up questions)

Parent Focus Group Questions:

1. How far into the college search and application process was your daughter prior to the pandemic?
 - a. How was she feeling about the process at that time?

- b. How were you feeling about the process?
2. What was your engagement in the process pre-pandemic? What items or tasks were you specifically involved in?
 - a. How did you daughter seem to respond to your engagement?
3. What were your goals for the process pre-pandemic?
4. How was your daughter feeling about the process of applying to college during a pandemic? What did you observe? How were her stress levels during the application process? How has her stress been as she awaits replies?
5. Was your involvement in the process impacted by the pandemic? If so, how? What tasks were you involved in?
6. Did the pandemic impact your thinking about the college process? If so, how? In other words, have your goals for your daughter changed?

Advisor Focus Group Questions:

1. What did your role or involvement in the college process look like pre-pandemic?
2. What does your role or involvement in the college process look like during the pandemic?
3. How did students describe their feelings about the college process pre-pandemic?
4. How do students describe their feelings about the college process now? What are you observing?
5. How much do you feel your students relied on you for information or support about the college admission process pre-pandemic?

6. How much do you feel your students rely on you for information or support about the college admission process during the pandemic?
7. From your perspective, how did the college admission process impact the overall mental and physical wellbeing of your students?

Alisha M. Couch, MBA

818 N. Quincy St., Apt. 408

Arlington, VA 22203

614-306-5392

acouch2@jhu.edu

Education: Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD
Doctor of Education (degree anticipated 2021)
Specialization: Mind, Brain, and Teaching
Research interests include: Neuroeducation, college admission counseling, college admissions, all girls' schools, stress in the college admission process, adolescent wellbeing.

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN
Master of Business Administration
Master of Business Administration with an emphasis in marketing and leadership studies
Degree awarded: May 2007

Research Project: *"The State of our Business - a Perspective from Indiana Executives"*
One of five MBA students selected for an inaugural, collaborative study with Inside Indiana Business, Ice Miller LLP and Butler University to discover the opinions and attitudes of Indiana's CEOs. Butler MBA students: (1.) collected and analyzed secondary and qualitative data, (2.) designed a comprehensive online survey sent to 1,050 Indiana business leaders and (3.) interpreted survey results from 210 respondents.

Butler University, Indianapolis, IN
Bachelor of Science, Marketing with Honors
Minor: Political Science, College of Liberal Arts & Sciences
Degree awarded: May 2004

Professional Experience: National Cathedral School, Washington, DC
Director of College Guidance (2019 – current)
Works closely with the current college guidance office staff to counsel a class of approximately 70 – 80 students and families through all phases of the college selection, application, and admission process the college search and admissions process. Supervises the other two members of the office and reports to the Upper School Head.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Lead the NCS college guidance team in advocating for NCS students at their colleges of choice
- *Understand and anticipate national trends, staying abreast of new programs and policies at colleges and university, and communicating these effectively and thoroughly with colleagues, parents, and students
- *Establish and maintain relationships with college admission officers on behalf of the school and the students
- *Write letters of recommendation
- *Organize and present workshops and meetings for parents and students
- *Conduct individual and small group meetings with students and parents regarding all aspects of the college application process
- *Participate in professional development opportunities, including travel to colleges and

conferences

- *Work with teachers and administrators as NCS moves beyond the AP program by the 2022 – 2023 school year

- *Serve as an academic advisor for a cohort of eight girls

- *Teach Social-Psychology, a semester long social science elective

Ohio Wesleyan University, Delaware, OH

Director of Admission Operations and Transfer Recruitment (2015 - 2019)

Due to a strategic initiative to grow the university's enrollment by over 20% (2020 students by the year 2020) the size of the admission staff was increased and the Director of Admission role was split into two separate director level positions.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Managed the electronic application review process for all freshman, transfer and international applications. Included supervising application processing, training admission staff, reviewing all admission decisions and leading the admission committee.

- *Co-captain of Slate – a CRM used in all aspects of the recruiting process. Led the implementation of the system in 2015 and continue to co-manage the CRM.

- *Planned and executed all enrollment actions related to transfer students including communications, web and social media activities and recruitment events.

- *Worked directly with all domestic transfer students throughout the admission process, including application review, transfer credit evaluation, advising and scheduling.

- *Led 'Preferred Pathway Partnership' with Columbus State Community College.

Coordinate all activities related to the promotion of the articulation agreement.

- *Directed OWU's College Credit Plus program – a statewide mandate that allows high school students to earn college credit. The purpose of the program is to promote rigorous academic pursuits and provide a wide variety of options to college-ready students.

- *Served as the admission representative on Ohio Wesleyan's Retention Intervention Team – a group that responds to individual reports of academic and/or social concerns. The group also monitors individuals that have one or more retention risk factors.

- *Served as a member of the 'President's Council', convened by Dr. Rock Jones, President of Ohio Wesleyan University.

Instructor - UC 160: The OWU Experience, an interdisciplinary course designed to connect new students to Ohio Wesleyan, the diverse intellectual community, and the ethos of a liberal arts education. One section of the course was specifically designated for transfer students.

Director of Admission (2012-2015)

Supervised 14 professionals including all admission counseling and support staff, and oversaw all domestic territories. Executed initiatives to reach aggressive enrollment goals. Involved extensive managerial responsibilities, analytical skills, and leadership for a Top 100 national liberal arts university.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Provided direct oversight of all admission related projects, responsibilities and outreach efforts.

- *Coordinated all domestic travel management – including strategic planning, forecasting, budget management and goal setting.

- *Assisted with the prospective student search process including strategic name purchasing.

- *Served as the admission representative on the scholarship committee, working in conjunction with the Office of Financial Aid.
- *Processed financial aid appeals while closely monitoring the discount and yield rates.
- *Worked closely with the Alumni Office in event planning, recruitment and travel management. Defined primary, secondary and tertiary markets and developed strategic recruitment plans for each region.
- *Managed personal recruitment territory including Delaware County, OH, Colorado and transfer recruitment. Developed specific recruitment plan to regain market share in Central Ohio.

Associate Director of Admission (2010-2012)

Managed seven full-time admission counselors, spanning multiple generations and backgrounds. Executed the strategic plans of the VP of Enrollment.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Hired, trained, and supervised admission counseling staff.
- *Presented admission and financial aid information to prospective students and families throughout the country through high school visits, college fairs, off-campus interviews and on-campus events.
- *Built relationships with a personal applicant pool of 300+ students from Cleveland, AK, CO, MT, OR and WA.
- *Served as a member of the Admission Technology Team, which managed all social media strategies including Facebook groups/ad campaigns, live video chats and YouTube video production.
- *Created two new admission outreach initiatives – Guidance Counselor Liaison and Parent Liaison.
- *Participated in numerous “Colleges that Change Lives” programs and events across the country.

Ohio Northern University, Ada, OH

Associate Director of Law Admissions (2007-2009)

Recruited academically talented students to fill the ONU College of Law class. Involved extensive relationship building with students and pre-law advisors, working with diverse communities, application review, scholarship evaluation, marketing, data analysis and managerial skills.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Charged with developing and implementing a strategic recruitment plan to attract and retain multicultural students from across the United States.
- *Managed the admission prospective/admitted student database, developed queries and analyzed statistical data to assist in forecasting and strategic decision making throughout the admission cycle.
- *Created the communications flow and developed print and digital marketing materials.
- *Implemented communication with students through the use of ‘Chat University’ instant message system and Facebook.
- *Delivered professional presentations to prospective students and their families, cultivated relationships and maintained frequent contact throughout the admission cycle.
- *Organized and executed all on-campus Law Admissions related events including: Legal Scholar Visit Days, Summer and Fall Orientation and interviews for the Summer

Starter Program.

- *Developed relationships with pre-law advisors and career counselors from highly selective colleges and universities (including top HBCU's) across 13 states through various communication and extensive travel. Personally visited over 75 college and universities.

- *Collaborated with admission office to review over 1,400 applications annually.

- *Provided leadership and guidance to Assistant Director, Administrative Assistant and student workers while supporting the Assistant Dean/Director of Admissions.

Butler University, Office of Admission, Indianapolis, IN

Senior Admission Counselor (2004-2007)

Recruited high school students to fill the Butler University freshman class. Involved a high degree of professionalism, relationship building, attention to detail, forecasting, application reading, scholarship evaluation and individual counseling.

Key Responsibilities:

- *Managed an application load of 700+ students per year. Traveled extensively throughout Indiana, Minnesota, Ohio and Wisconsin. Provided intensive counseling and customer service for all students and families within the territory, serving as their main point of contact within the University.

- *Trained and mentored new Admission staff members on the specifics of the cyclical enrollment management process.

- *Member of the Admission Committee - a group of senior managers that reviewed and made admission decisions on difficult admission cases.

- *Liaison for High School Relations - coordinated and executed all admission activities related to high school Guidance Counselors. Managed \$25,000 High School Relations budget.

- *Event coordinator for annual Guidance Counselor program, drawing from domestic and international schools.

- *Established the "Butler University Guidance Counselor Advisory Board" a group of eight guidance counselors from across the country that convened quarterly to discuss current issues and best practices in higher education.

- *Promoted to the Senior Admission Counselor level after 17 months.

Professional Presentations: "Customizing Your Web Marketing Tactics to Impact Enrollment and Meet Your Goals" National Association of College Admission Counseling National Conference - Indianapolis, IN., September, 2014

"Building a Community College Partnership – a Case Study of Columbus State Community College and Ohio Wesleyan University" ACT Regional Conference - Columbus, OH., January, 2015

Professional Activities:

- *NACAC (National Association for College Admission Counseling) - 2004-2007, 2010-current
- *ACCIS (Association of College Counselors in Independent Schools) – 2019-current
- *AIMS (Association of Independent Maryland and DC Schools) – 2019-current
- *NCGS (National Coalition of Girls' Schools) – 2019-current
- *OACAC (Ohio Association for College Admission Counseling) – 2010-2019
-Admission Practices subcommittee member
- *OPCAD (Ohio Private College Admission Directors) – 2012-2019

*GLCA (Great Lakes College Association) Deans and Director – 2012-2019
*CTCL (Colleges That Change Lives) member institution – 2010-2019
*Law School Admission Council (LSAC) Member - 2007 - 2009
*IACAC (Indiana Association for College Admission Counseling) - 2004-2007
-Article published in Spring 2005 Journal

Personal
Activities: Enjoys running, cycling and triathlons - completed Ironman 70.3 Ohio - 2016
Flatlander yet avid mountain lover - Mt. Rainier summit 2011, 2012